

Maiden
IN THE
TUDOR COURT

JUNE
FRANCIS

June Francis
MAIDEN in the Tudor
Court: His Runaway Maiden /
Pirate's Daughter, Rebel Wife

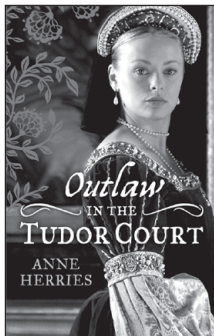
Аннотация

His Runaway Maiden Escaping her cruel stepmother, Rosamund Appleby heads in disguise for London...until she is halted by Baron Alex Nilsson! He seeks to protect her as they journey together. But when Alex, who trusts no woman, finds himself conveniently married to beautiful Rosamund, he doesn't know which is more treacherous: the enemies plotting his downfall or the seductive lure of a woman in his bed...Pirate's Daughter, Rebel Wife When Captain Henry Mariner rescues a lone and vulnerable maiden from the sea, he has good reason to feel guilty about placing her in such a precarious predicament. But despite Bridget McDonald's reserve toward him, he knows there is no other option. The only way to protect her life – and her virtue – is to marry her!

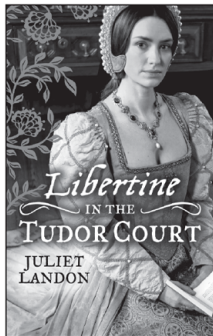
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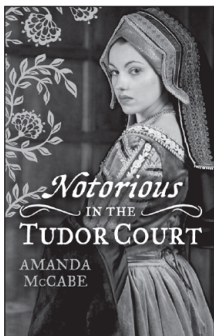
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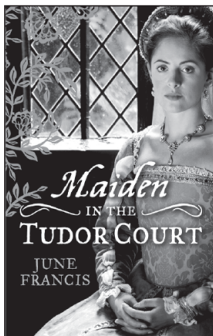
April 2014



May 2014



June 2014



July 2014

**Maiden in the Tudor Court
His Runaway Maiden
Pirate's Daughter, Rebel Wife
June Francis**



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JUNE FRANCIS'S interest in old wives' tales and folk customs led her into a writing career. History has always fascinated her, and her first five novels were set in Medieval times. She has also written fourteen sagas based in Liverpool and Chester. Married with three grown-up sons, she lives on Merseyside. On a clear day she can see the sea and the distant Welsh hills from her house. She enjoys swimming, fell-walking, music, lunching with friends and smoochie dancing with her husband. More information about June can be found at her website: www.june francis.co.uk

His Runaway Maiden

Prologue

January 1502

Alex steadied his restless horse with a firm hand but, just like his steed, he was impatient to be on his way.

‘You understand what I want you to do?’ growled the Earl of Douglas.

‘Aye,’ said Alex, meeting the Scotsman’s gaze. ‘You want me to act as your spy.’

‘I’m led to believe that you have a particular talent for gathering information and you will be well rewarded for your troubles. I had a particular fondness for your mother and propose to give you the house and land that she loved in recognition of you as my son.’

Alex thanked him in a dry voice, thinking that a house on the east coast of Scotland, close to the border with England, could prove useful, but such ‘recognition’ from his natural father was a little late in arriving. But the journey had not been a waste of time—the earl had provided him with information about the McDonalds that had shed a light on a matter that had vexed him during his investigations in London six months ago.

‘You have memorised the password?’ asked the earl.

‘Aye. I’m not a fool.’

‘Nay, you just showed a bad lack of judgement in the woman you chose to lavish your attentions on,’ growled the earl. ‘You’re

not the first man to do so, and neither will you be the last.'

Alex's jaw clenched and he wished his beloved grandmother had not been so frank in her missive to the earl about Ingrid. His romantic attachments were certainly none of his father's business and, looking at the man before him, he wondered what it was that had attracted his own mother to him. However, it had been his grandmother's dying wish that he make himself known to his father. Perhaps to make amends for the falsehood she had told him as a small boy, something that he had believed to be true until the day she died.

'Well?' demanded the earl.

'I am to make myself known to the elderly Lady Elizabeth Stanley and she will see to it that I am enlisted in her troupe of performers for the proxy wedding of the Princess Margaret to your King James of Scotland at Richmond Palace. You trust this woman?' There was a touch of irony in Alex's voice.

The earl frowned. 'She is kin by marriage to the wife of one of my allies, and both are related to King Henry's stepfather, the Earl of Derby.'

'Aye, so you have already said, but even those closest to us can prove false,' said Alex.

'According to your grandmother, she was also a highly regarded customer of your grandfather for several years.'

A vague memory stirred in Alex's mind. 'Where will I find her? If she is the person I remember, she was fond of travel.'

'She is spending the twelve days of Christmas at Lathom

House in the Palatine of Lancaster.’ Alex stiffened, but remained silent as his father continued. ‘If the weather worsens or you lose your way and find that she has already left by the time you arrive there, then make all speed to her mansion in London.’ The earl gazed at the shadowy, powerfully built figure beneath the dark, leafless branches of the trees. ‘If my enemies were to learn of your relationship to me, then your life could be in danger, so take care. We must stop the piracy in the northern seas so the peace pact can go ahead.’

Alex agreed, but his expression remained impassive. He had lived with danger for years, risking his life on several occasions during his travels gathering information for his Swedish grandfather and his country; but it was in London that Alex had come closest to losing his life.

‘Hopefully, I’ll find that all is as you say,’ he murmured.

‘Aye. Fare thee well, then, laddie.’ The earl clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Trust no one. A man can so easily be persuaded to reveal secrets when between the sheets.’

Alex ignored this sally and bid his father ‘*Adjö!*’

As he set off on the road south, his thoughts were not of his mission, but of the beautiful Ingrid and Harry, whom he had cared for like a younger brother, but whom he suspected had betrayed him for love and money.

His grandmother had told Alex not to pursue revenge. She had called Harry that *crazy English boy*, but did not believe him duplicitous. *You must seek the truth*, she had said with her dying

breath. Part of him had wanted to yell at her, *But you deceived me, just as they did, and this day you have taken something precious from me that was lodged in my heart and helped to make me the man I am.* But instead, he had quashed his hurt and anger and gathered her emaciated body in his arms and wept, for she had cared for him since he was a babe and had loved him unconditionally.

Despite her words, the desire for revenge still burned in Alex's heart and he decided to seek out Sir James Appleby, who had a manor in the Palatine of Lancaster, and see if he could help him find the treacherous couple.

Chapter One

They were coming!

With a rising panic, Rosamund Appleby gazed about her, searching for a place to hide. Her eyes alighted on the oak chest, carved with field mice and conies and curling tendrils of woodbine, and she hurried over to it. Bundling her faded brown homespun skirts about her thighs, she climbed inside the chest and hastily closed the lid. The slap, slap, slap of their leather-soled shoes on stone came nearer and nearer. Their voices grew louder. She buried herself amongst the garments in the chest and, scarcely breathing, prayed they would not find her.

‘Where in the devil’s name has she gone now?’ demanded Rosamund’s stepmother, Lady Monica Appleby. ‘I checked her bedchamber and she was not there.’

‘You frightened her, Mama. She fled like a rabbit with a ferret on its heels and has probably left the house.’ William giggled. ‘Edward said six months ago that she should be locked away. I know you agreed with him, so why did you wait until today?’

‘Because her death, so close to her father’s, could have roused suspicion. Whilst Sir James lived, I had to pretend to care about her well-being.’

Rosamund’s eyes filled with tears when she thought of her father and her fists clenched at the memory of her stepmother’s cruel duplicity. She wished she could spring out of the chest

and tell her exactly what she thought of her—but that would be foolish.

‘Now time has passed since his *very timely* death, I must deal with her,’ muttered Lady Monica. ‘Especially since *that woman’s* servant called here yesterday. I cannot risk Rosamund voicing her suspicions to her.’

‘Who is this woman?’ asked William.

‘Lady Elizabeth Stanley. I knew her when I was a girl and I hated her even then. She’s been staying at Lathom House after spending years going backwards and forwards between England and Europe, but hopefully she should be leaving for London soon. I told her messenger that her goddaughter was sick abed and could see no one. Her taking notice of Rosamund right now is extremely inconvenient. I can see her proving a nuisance.’

Rosamund stuffed a handful of linen into her mouth to stifle a gasp. She had been a child last time she had seen Lady Elizabeth and her memories of that period in her life were hazy. She had believed that her godmother had died of the same disease that had killed Rosamund’s mother. If only she could speak to Lady Elizabeth, perhaps she could help her out of the terrible situation she was in.

‘You should have sent her a message asking her to call and given her one of your potions,’ said William with another of his irritating giggles.

Rosamund heard the sound of a slap and memories of past punishments caused her to shudder.

‘That would not have served us, dolt,’ snapped Lady Monica, sitting on the lid of the chest, so causing the wood to creak with the force of her weight. ‘I’d have the whole of the Stanley family down on my head. Oh, why couldn’t you have been born with your brother’s wits?’

‘That hurt!’ wailed William.

‘Well, think before you speak. At least I’ll be able to mould the wife I have chosen for you into shape.’

‘A wife for me!’ babbled William. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Bridget,’ replied his mother. ‘She is sixteen and the niece of a close kinsman of mine. You’ll be meeting them soon.’

‘You won’t leave me alone with her, Mama?’ William’s voice was sharp with anxiety.

‘Of course not,’ she said in a soothing voice. ‘There are questions her uncle and I need answers to from her. She’ll need a close watch kept on her, but first we need to find Rosamund. If only Edward was here instead of in London. He would have been able to deal with this troublesome girl. As it is, he is obsessed with his campaign to be the next Lord Mayor of London and that will need a fortune to fund it. But enough of this talk—we must get on with our search.’

William said, ‘Perhaps Rosamund has gone to the woodcutter’s hut. You know how friendly she was with Joshua Wood.’

‘If she has fled there in the hope of gaining his help, then she will be disappointed. He has gone, never to return. But you

could be right about her visiting that hovel. We'll hasten in that direction. If we find her, then...' Lady Monica made a sound that sent a chill through her stepdaughter.

Rosamund waited until their footsteps had died away before pushing up the lid and casting aside the garments in the chest and climbing out. She felt heartsick, knowing that, with Joshua gone, she was utterly friendless. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she remembered two boys at swordplay. One of them was Joshua and the other her brother, Harry, who had drowned round about the same time as their mother's death. His clothes had been found by a river where he used to swim. Sometimes in her sleep, she had dark dreams of her mother crying out to save her and of Harry, warning her to run for her life as he was carried away before he was silenced. She would wake up, filled with fear and drenched in perspiration. Perhaps, once she was away from this place, the dreams would fade.

She dried her eyes on her sleeve and considered her situation. If she were to make her escape in her present guise, she would be too easily recognised. She picked up the white shirt that she had thrown to one side and remembered the time when she had dressed as a boy. Delving into the chest, she found a pair of hose, a russet doublet and a boy's hat with a feather in it. She gnawed on her nether lip. Did she dare? Last time she had donned these garments her stepmother had whipped her until she could scarcely stand. Rosamund's father had been away at the time and Lady Monica had warned her that if she dared to speak of it to

her father then she would be punished more severely. She needed the devil beaten out of her for such sinful behaviour.

Rosamund wished she'd had the courage to talk to her father about wanting to have been born a boy, then he might have cared for her as much as he had for Harry. Instead, fear had guaranteed her silence. But what was she thinking of standing here, wasting time? She had to escape. She must change her clothes. There was naught so comfortable as a youth's nether garments for sitting astride a horse and riding hell for leather. Not that she'd had the opportunity to ride out alone since her father's death. There was only one problem about pretending to be a youth now. She gazed down at her breasts and attempted to flatten them with both hands and knew she would need binding.

Fortunately there was no one in sight as she passed, like a shadow, to the turret where her bedchamber was situated. It was the work of moments to find the binding she used for her monthly courses. She removed her clothes and bound her breasts before donning the shirt, padded brown hose and a green woollen doublet. Slipping off her shoes, she shoved her feet into a pair of stout boots before pulling on the feathered hat over the linen cap that confined her dark hair. Removing her winter cloak from a hook on the back of the door, she swung it round her shoulders and fastened its strings. Her heart was beating fast and, in her haste, she almost forgot Harry's short-sword that she had found hidden away in a chest several years ago. Although England was more settled and peaceful than in those early years after Henry

VII had defeated Richard III at Bosworth Field, it still did not do to go out unarmed.

She picked up her gloves and hurried downstairs, relieved that she could hear no sounds of activity coming from the kitchen. She left by the door that led into the yard and made her way to the stables. Her lips moved in silent prayer, hoping that the groom and stable boys were busy elsewhere.

To her relief the building was empty, but there was only one horse in the stalls and that was the oldest nag on the manor. Her spirits sank at the sight of Betsy, but she knew that she had no option but to saddle her up. She did so with hands that trembled.

Away from the house she found pleasure in the bite of the wind that whipped colour into her cheeks as she set out across the fields in the direction of Lathom House. Twenty-two years old and penniless, she could only pray that her godmother would help her. Fear and apprehension was a cold knot in her belly. Yet surely when she explained her situation, her godmother would understand her need for such a disguise?

Rosamund was still fretting about whether she would be turned away from Lathom's gates when a hedge loomed up. She groaned and had to back up Betsy. Taking a deep breath, she urged the horse towards the jump. They barely cleared the thicket of hazel. As they landed Rosamund sensed that the nag had caught a hoof on something. The beast landed awkwardly and one of Rosamund's feet came loose from the stirrup. The force of the jolt caused her to slip sideways. For several moments

she dangled with her hands brushing the ground and then she managed to free her other foot. She fell into a patch of half-frozen muddy turf.

Pushing herself up, she spat out dirt before wiping her face with the back of her glove. Then she glanced back towards the hedge and saw a man stretched out on the ground. Her heart jerked inside her breast and, with knees that shook, she walked towards him.

His hat lay a few feet away and Rosamund picked it up before hunkering down beside him. She stared into the stranger's handsomely rugged face and with a sinking heart observed a swelling and an abrasion on his jaw where Betsy's hoof must have caught him a blow. To her relief his golden lashes lifted and a pair of penetrating tawny-brown eyes gazed into hers. She experienced the oddest sensation. Then his arm shot up and seized her by the throat and in one swift movement he rose to his feet, carrying her with him.

'Who are you?' he growled.

The hat fell from her fingers and, terrified, she clawed at that hand that threatened to cut off her breathing. She wanted to say, *Are you mad? I can scarcely breathe, never mind speak.*

As if he had read her thoughts, his fingers slackened a fraction. 'Answer my question!' he demanded.

But Rosamund could not get a word out, for fear still held her in its grip. She felt him fumble beneath her homespun cloak and a strangled gasp escaped her lips. Instinctively she kicked out at

him. He swore in an unfamiliar tongue as he disarmed her. Her short-sword was thrust in his belt before he seized her dainty booted foot.

‘I would not try that again if I were you,’ he warned.

Alex was not in the best of moods. Not only had he failed to meet Lady Elizabeth at Lathom House, but he had also lost himself in the back lanes in his search for Appleby Manor. He had asked for directions from one of the guards, but obviously they had not been clear enough.

‘Come, lad, speak!’ he ordered, loosening his grip a fraction more.

Rosamund was not about to admit to being a woman to this barbaric stranger, whose voice held an inflection that, despite her fear of him, she found attractive. He was obviously a foreigner and perhaps that was the reason for his aggression. She blurted out the first name that came to mind. ‘Joshua Wood!’

Alex flicked back a lock of flaxen hair and brought the youth’s filthy face closer to his and rasped, ‘I deem you deliberately rode me down, Master Wood.’

‘No! You were out of sight behind the hedge so I could not see you,’ she croaked, struggling to free her foot. ‘If I was as suspicious of folk as you are, then I would want to know if you were hiding there to waylay me.’

‘You flatter yourself that I should consider you important enough to wish to pounce on you.’ His hand moved disturbingly from her foot to her knee and he hoisted her higher against him.

‘That is true,’ she stammered. ‘I—I am b-but a simple woodcutter.’

Alex scrutinised the frightened face with its uncommon blue-violet eyes and long black lashes and he had the strangest feeling of familiarity. Abruptly he released his captive. ‘You lie!’

‘You brute,’ she gasped, slumping on the ground and rubbing her throat.

‘You will come with me,’ he said, going over to his horse.

‘What!’ She sat up straight. ‘Why should you believe I would want to go anywhere with you?’ she said hoarsely. ‘Your intention might be to kill me.’

‘Aye, you could be right. Keep that in mind, my fine lad, if you wish to see the end of this day. You deal honestly with me and I will free you when I have finished with you.’ Alex took a coil of thin rope from his horse and strode over to her. ‘I am looking for Appleby Manor. You will take me there.’

His words filled her with dismay. It would be disastrous for her to do what he said. Yet if she didn’t, perhaps he would slit her throat. A squeak of fear escaped her. What could he want at Appleby Manor? Did he have aught to do with her stepmother’s schemes? Surely he could not be the close kinsman she was expecting? He did not speak like a Scotsman. What was she to do? Suddenly she realised that there was only one thing she could do and that was to lead him astray.

‘Why do you hesitate? Is it that you are not frightened enough?’ growled Alex. He had met some effeminate young men in his

time, but there was something different about this one. Perhaps Master Wood felt a need to prove to himself that he was a real man and that was why he had lied about being a woodcutter. To wield an axe, to chop down trees and slice trunks into planks needed strength.

‘I would be mad not to be frightened of you,’ said Rosamund, trying to control the tremor in her voice. Slowly she rose to her feet. ‘But return my weapon to me and I will prove my courage by fighting with you.’

Alex’s smile was grim. ‘You are a brave but foolish young man to challenge me. Who are you really? I reckon your weapon is too good to belong to a woodcutter. It would fetch a goodly sum if placed on the market. No doubt you stole it. You could be part of a gang of ruffians out to act as a decoy and lead me into a trap.’

‘I am no thief,’ she said indignantly. ‘Nor do I belong to a gang.’

‘I have only your word for that,’ said Alex calmly, unwinding the cord. ‘We will be roped together so you cannot gallop off and warn the others that there’s rich pickings on the way.’

Rosamund was aghast and backed away from him, only to slip in a patch of mud. He dragged her to her feet and, despite her struggles, he managed to tie one end of the cord to her wrist and the other he looped about his hand.

‘You are quite mad,’ she said in a shaken voice.

‘If I am, then I have been driven mad.’

She had spoken those very words to her father once and he had sunk his head in his hands. She had stared in anguish,

watching his shoulders shake before he had waved a hand at her in dismissal. She, too, had wept as she had left the room. She could not believe this stranger could have descended to the depths that she had and that caused her to spit out at him.

‘You mock me! I do not like having my word doubted. It is you who are the thief. Return that shortsword to me at once. It belonged to my dead brother and it is all I have of him.’

The lad sounded so sincere that Alex almost believed him. But then he reminded himself that he had heard many a word spoken in so-called sincerity. ‘I will return it at my convenience,’ he said coldly.

Rosamund felt a familiar helplessness creep over her. She told herself that she must not give in to the lowness of spirits that had gripped her so often in the past. She remembered how she had managed to overcome those dark moods by riding out on her beautiful horse. The one that Edward, her elder stepbrother, had removed from the stable after her father’s death. She had not been allowed beyond the gardens after that and there had been times when life was so utterly unbearable that she had given vent to her anger by smashing many a jar. Then they had locked her in her bedchamber and she had resorted to the submissive behaviour that had served her well in the past. But she was in no mood to act so at the moment. After all, she was supposed to be a brave youth, not a fearful girl.

‘I should have left you lying on the ground and ridden over you,’ she seethed. ‘Instead, I behaved like a Christian, and what

thanks do I receive? You treat me like a cur.' She glowered at him, thinking that she would have her revenge when they reached Lathom. She would call on the guards to take this foreigner prisoner.

'If you wish for better treatment, Master Wood, I suggest you only speak when spoken to,' said Alex.

He tugged on the rope and she went flying into him. He picked her up as if she weighed no more than a bundle of rags and threw her into the saddle. As Rosamund grappled for the reins, Old Betsy let out a deep sigh and seemed to sag in the middle. The next moment Rosamund was almost dragged off her horse as Alex swung up on to his own mount.

'This is intolerable!' Her voice shook. 'What is your reason for wishing to go to Appleby Manor, anyway?'

'That is none of your business, lad,' said Alex, giving her some slack. 'Take me there and I might even reward you.'

She wanted to give him a hot answer, but her sense of desolation was suddenly such that she knew if she spoke she would burst into tears and that would never do. She felt another jerk on the rope.

'You are supposed to be leading the way,' he said.

Rosamund darted him a poisonous look.

'Forgive me if I appear overly cautious, Master Wood, but one has difficulty these days even trusting one's friends,' said Alex. That slight inflection was evident in his voice and once again Rosamund was oddly affected by it. 'Now tell your horse to walk

on,' he added.

Rosamund did so. Then she spent several seconds imagining the moment when he would get his comeuppance. Then the reality of her situation struck her and the corners of her mouth drooped. A mournful sigh escaped her.

Alex gave her a sidelong glance and felt a stir of pity at the sight of such abject misery. Then he hardened his heart. Pity could have no place in his armoury. The youth had lied to him. He could be all that he had accused him of being, but Alex was prepared to risk that to discover if Harry and Ingrid were at Appleby Manor.

They rode on in silence between high, bare hedgerows until they reached an open aspect. Suddenly Alex had a growing conviction that he had passed this way before. When he recognised the walls of Lathom ahead, he turned on his companion and pulled on the cord, causing Rosamund to almost tumble from the horse.

'Do you take me for a fool, Master Wood?' roared Alex. 'This is not Appleby Manor, but Lathom House!'

Rosamund managed to grab the pommel and heave herself back into the saddle. 'You could have killed me!' she cried.

'But I didn't,' snapped Alex. 'What jape is this you play? I left this place only a couple of hours ago.'

His words took Rosamund utterly by surprise. 'What were you doing at the Earl of Derby's mansion?'

'That is none of your business.' His eyes flashed golden fire

‘Answer my question or I’ll cut your throat. ?????? Why have you brought me here?’

‘I—I have no w-wish to return to A-Appleby Manor,’ she stuttered. ‘They would kill me.’

Alex gazed into the delicate features and his anger abated. ‘Why? What wrong have you done?’

Rosamund felt her ire rising again. ‘Why do you believe it is I who am in the wrong when I am fleeing for my life?’

Alex frowned. ‘Because, Master Wood, I deem you are no woodcutter, which means you lied to me.’

She felt sick with fear. ‘Wh-what evidence do you have to make such an accusation?’

Alex smiled humourlessly. ‘Your stature is enough. It takes strength to chop down trees, Master Wood—you look more suited to needlepoint. Tell me, who is it you fear at Appleby Manor?’

Rosamund had no intention of telling him. After all, he could be in the pay of her stepbrother, Edward Fustian, who had dealings in London with foreigners.

‘Why should I answer your question when you will not answer mine?’ she muttered.

‘Because I am the stronger, little bantam.’

‘You mean you would bully me like you have already done in order to have your own way,’ she said sullenly.

He raised his tawny eyebrows. ‘I beg pardon if I have hurt you,’ he said in a mocking voice. ‘But if you do not wish to take

me to Appleby Manor, then answer my questions.’

‘Will you let me go if I do?’

‘If I judge you are telling me the truth. Who dwells there?’

Rosamund could see no harm in answering him. ‘The family is small and consists of Lady Monica Appleby and her son William. She has another son who lives in London.’

This news was not what Alex had hoped to hear. ‘What of Sir James?’

‘Dead!’

The news came as something of a shock.

Rosamund saw that he paled beneath his tanned skin. ‘You knew Sir James?’ she asked.

Alex pulled himself together. ‘I met him only the once.’

‘You seem very shocked by the news, sir.’

‘Indeed, I am. I had hoped to gain information from him. When did he die?’

‘Six months ago.’ Her expression was bleak.

That news was a further shock. ‘I met him shortly before he died,’ said Alex. ‘He made no mention that he had two sons.’

‘That is because they are *not* his sons, but belong to his second wife, Lady Monica.’ Rosamund watched his expression alter and wondered what this information was that he had wanted from her father, but she did not see how she could be of help to him on that score. ‘Did you meet him in London?’

‘Aye, and that is where I must go now. I will risk showing you some trust. Are you able to guide me out of this palatine and set

me on the road to that city? I will pay you to act as my guide.'

She shook her head. 'No! I can't come with you. I have business at Lathom House.'

Alex scowled. 'So that is why you brought me here. I don't care what your business is, you will guide me out of this backwater or you will be sorry.'

Alarmed, she said, 'I will do what you say if you answer me one question. Did you speak to Lady Elizabeth Stanley whilst you were at Lathom?'

Alex's suspicions were immediately roused. 'Why do you ask, lad? What business do you have with the lady?'

Rosamund knew if she told him the truth, then he would know for certain that she had deceived him. 'It is a private matter.'

'I wager it is,' said Alex silkily. 'Well, I will not keep secret from you that the lady and her entourage left yesterday afternoon for London.'

Rosamund's spirits plummeted. Her hope in coming here was all in vain. What was she to do now?

Watching the dismay cloud Master Wood's face, Alex had the strangest feeling that he was right to be suspicious of this slender youth and determined to discover more about him. 'If you still wish to speak to the lady, then I suggest you accompany me to London.'

Rosamund knew that she should not agree to his suggestion. Yet, he was giving her a second chance to gain the help of her godmother. Would it be a bigger mistake not to agree? On the

other hand, was it crazy to even consider going with him? He was a foreigner who had almost choked the life out of her. This should have told her, if aught else didn't, that he was a dangerous man. No, it would be sheer folly to fall in with his plan.

She tilted her chin. 'I do not wish to go with you! In fact, I refuse to do so!' She dug her heels into Betsy's flanks. The horse jerked forward and then collapsed.

Chapter Two

Rosamund's shock was intense. She barely had time to kick her feet free of the stirrups before she felt a tug on her wrist as Alex bent over and lifted her from the saddle. He lowered her to the ground before dismounting and hunkering down beside the horse. He placed his hand on the beast's neck and held it there for several moments before looking up at her.

'I'm sorry, Master Wood, but your horse is dead.'

Rosamund fell on her knees besides the horse and a sob burst from her. She stroked the horse's head before burying her face against its shaggy coat to hide her tears. 'Poor Betsy,' she whispered.

Alex gazed down at the bent head and the exposed slender neck. Had he imagined that sob? What conclusions could he draw from it? He could recall having difficulty holding back tears when his first pony had died. Grieving for a beloved horse was natural. Perhaps he was mistaken to have considered even for a moment that this uncommon youth was a thief.

'We are presented with a problem, Master Wood,' he said. 'I am short of time, but you are without a mount. What do you want to do?'

Rosamund turned a tearstained face towards him. 'You are giving me a choice?'

Alex wondered if he was being overly sympathetic, but told

himself that it was important that he discovered what Master Wood's business was with her ladyship. 'I need to go to London. You wish to speak with Lady Elizabeth, who is on her way there. Someone is bound to pass this way and they will find your horse and do what is necessary.'

Rosamund wiped her face with the back of her hand and rose to her feet. 'I will walk to London,' she said in a small voice.

Alex frowned. His suspicions, his common sense and his sympathy for a fellow human being in such a situation were at war with each other. 'You will not catch up with the lady on the road, Master Wood. I doubt I will do so on horseback. Besides, it will take you a long time to walk to London. If your strength does not fail you and you are not attacked by robbers and you manage to reach your destination, it is even possible that you might find the lady not at home. What would you do then?'

'I had not thought so far ahead.' She heaved a deep sigh.

'You must make a decision.'

Rosamund lifted her head and saw a look in his eyes that surprised her. 'Are you suggesting that I share your horse?' she asked.

'I do not have all day, Master Wood,' said Alex, untying the cord at her wrist. 'If I were in your situation, I wouldn't accept my offer. But of course, it would depend on how desperate I was to speak to Lady Elizabeth.'

Rosamund was extremely desperate. If she stayed here, who was to say that her stepmother and her men would not find her

as soon as he left? Of course, in London there was the risk of being seen by Edward.

‘If you are going to decide to come with me, we must make a move now,’ rasped Alex. ‘The horse will not be able to travel swiftly carrying the two of us and I need to be in London by the twenty-second of this month.’

‘Why are you so keen to help me?’ asked Rosamund suspiciously.

He shrugged. ‘You are a fellow traveller and did not our Lord say we should help one another?’

‘You have not particularly behaved like a Christian so far,’ Rosamund dared to say. ‘But what choice do I have? I pray that you will prove to be the better of my options.’

‘I am truly honoured by your confidence in me,’ said Alex drily.

Rosamund flushed and could only hope that he did not guess her secret. So far he appeared not to have penetrated her disguise and God willing he would never do so.

‘But any wrong moves, such as trying to remove your weapon from my belt, Master Wood, and you’re in trouble. I’m not so naïve as to believe you might not try.’

The thought had not occurred to her. ‘I give you my word!’

‘The word of a liar!’ His gold-brown eyes flashed fire. ‘I will be on my guard. I have not forgotten waking up with such a headache that I could not remember where I was or who I was and had a knife wound in my shoulder that almost killed me.’

Rosamund's curiosity was roused. 'Who was the person that did this to you? Perhaps you gave them such a dislike of your boorish behaviour that they feared what you might do next.'

Alex growled, 'Watch your mouth, lad. Ingrid knew I trusted her and that was why she was able to betray me.' He pulled himself up short. What was he thinking of, speaking of a matter that had cut him to the heart to this—this—? He bent over her. His nose twitched as the feather in Master Wood's hat tickled his nostrils and he sneezed, then swore. 'I hope you are not going to make me regret my offer, but you will come to no harm, unless you give me real cause to slit your throat.'

Rosamund went as white as a sheet beneath her dirt. 'I will do exactly as you say,' she said in a trembling voice. 'I like my throat as it is.'

I must be mad, thought Alex. Gaining information from this one could cause me more trouble than it is worth. Yet he felt a monster for frightening this slender youth. Yet his brush with death six months ago had proved to him the dangers of allowing anyone to get too close to him.

Taking a blanket from a saddlebag, he formed it into a kind of cushion. Then he told Master Wood he would give him a leg up. Rosamund placed a foot in his laced hands and gripped his shoulder. She felt his muscles bunch and thought with a man as strong as him on her side, she would not need to fear her stepfamily again. Then she asked herself what was she thinking of even to consider he could be an ally?

As soon as she was up on the horse, Alex climbed into the saddle. ‘Now which direction do we take to reach the London road?’ he asked, thinking he would not be in this situation now if he had asked for a guide before leaving Lathom House, instead of just directions.

‘Take the left-hand turn,’ replied Rosamund.

As he took the turning, she was jerked against him and needed to clutch his cloak if she was not to slide from the horse. Suddenly she felt far removed from her previous existence and excitement stirred inside her. Even so, after a while, she began to feel apprehensive and questioned whether she had made the right decision. They would be on the road for days and that meant spending nights with this man.

‘I want information,’ said Alex, aware of those small hands on his back and the soft breath on his neck. ‘Tell me—how did Sir James die?’

‘It happened when he was in London. Lady Monica told me that it was an apoplexy, but I did not believe her. Far—’ Rosamund clamped her mouth shut on the word and recalled how often she had been told *to watch her tongue* or *keep silent* and *no one is going to believe what a mad girl has to say*.

‘Why do you not believe her?’

‘If I say what I think, you might accuse me of being mad,’ she said in a toneless voice.

‘Why should I believe you mad?’ he asked.

She did not answer him immediately, remembering vividly

Edward accusing her of being possessed by demons. In her loneliness, she had created an imaginary companion to whom she talked. He had overheard her and taunted her. She had screamed her denial and flew at him. He had knocked her to the ground and then dragged her by her hair to his mother. Lady Monica had locked Rosamund in her bedchamber for three days and nights and fed her solely on dry bread and water. Rosamund had threatened that she would tell her father what they had done to her when he returned home. But her stepmother had said that Sir James would agree with their actions because he knew his daughter was mad, but pretended not to notice her strange behaviour because he was ashamed of her. So again, she had kept her mouth shut, wanting her father to love her and hoping that the next time he went away they would remember her silence and she would suffer less at their hands.

‘Answer me!’ demanded Alex.

‘If I told you that I believed he was murdered, then you might agree with them that it was a figment of my fevered imagination,’ she said in a fierce voice.

‘Murdered! By “them” I presume you mean those that live at Appleby Manor?’

‘Perhaps, but I will say no more and you cannot make me do so. Even if you were to dismount and drag me from this horse and beat me.’

What a strange mixture was this youth, thought Alex. One moment he is frightened of me and prepared to do what I say,

but the next he speaks out bravely and it is obvious that he can be stubborn. He seriously considered the possibility that the youth had been beaten before in an attempt to gain information from him or for punishment. Another thought struck him. A father might beat an effeminate son, or—even a daughter who dressed as a youth. But the thought that bothered him most was that his travelling companion suspected Sir James of having been murdered in London. Was it possible? And if so—why?

He thought of Harry and recalled how when he had rescued him that he had been unable to remember whether he had once had siblings. Harry's earliest memory was of the cupboard-like space on the ship, where he had woken with a sore head and a frightening loss of identity.

Alex's thoughts were interrupted by his sudden awareness that Master Wood must have dozed off. His head was going bump, bump, bump against his shoulder. Alex reached behind him and seized the front of the youth's doublet and bellowed at him to rouse himself.

Rosamund started awake and at first could not think where she was and then the motion of the horse and the scent of the man filled her nostrils. She realised that her face was squashed against his shoulder and she found herself breathing in the smell of sandalwood and his maleness with an unfamiliar pleasure. Then she realised he was holding on to the material at her chest. Feeling hot all over, she tugged herself free. What if he had felt her breast despite the binding? Her secret would be out.

‘Stay awake, Master Wood,’ ordered Alex. ‘What good is a sleeping guide to me?’

Rosamund said gruffly, ‘It will not happen again.’

‘It had better not.’

After that incident Rosamund made certain that she stayed awake. It amazed her that she had managed to fall asleep in such a precarious position and in the company of this foreigner who had threatened her. She forced herself to concentrate on anything but him. She gazed at the frosty landscape and recalled the only time she had travelled to London.

It had been in the company of her father, stepmother and William. Edward was getting married and Rosamund could not help but pity his future wife, Marion. She remembered how besotted the new Mistress Fustian had been with her husband. Such adoration had not survived. Last time Marion had visited Appleby Manor with their two daughters, Rosamund had noticed the bruising on her neck and wrists. Edward wanted a son and his wife suffered for what he called her lack of success.

It was that kind of behaviour that caused Rosamund to consider spinsterhood preferable to marrying a man such as her stepbrother, although her stepmother had once suggested such a possibility. A long-suppressed memory reared its dragon-like head and she quickly quashed it. There were some things it was better not to dwell upon and fortunately her father had been against such a match.

The temperature had dropped by the time they crossed the

border into the Palatine of Chester and the sun had disappeared below the horizon. Soon it would be dark and Rosamund was worried. Surely they should have reached an inn by now, but the road stretched ahead of them with no sign of a building.

Alex's thoughts were running in a similar direction and he twisted in the saddle to speak to his travelling companion. He had difficulty in making out the slender features beneath the brim of the hat. 'Have you any idea where the nearest inn is, Master Wood?'

'It is some time since I passed this way,' answered Rosamund. 'I was certain we should have reached the one I had in mind by now, but I must be mistaken. Still, I am certain if we continue along this road then we will come to another sooner or later.'

'If this is the main London road, then that is likely,' said Alex, exacerbated. 'I would know how far we have to go.'

'I cannot help you with exact distances.' She felt irritated by the tone of his voice. 'We must just travel on.'

'So be it,' he growled. 'Let us hope we don't have to sleep in the open.'

The idea alarmed her, but she remained silent, not wishing to annoy him further by complaining. Visions of mulled wine, hot broth and a warm bed began to float before her eyes and she was tempted to snuggle into his back to keep warm. She resisted and somehow managed to remain upright.

They continued along the road, watching the silhouettes of trees and hedges merge into the darkness and stars prick the sky.

To their dismay, when they finally reached the dark outline of a building Alex had spotted some distance away, it was to discover that it was just a burnt-out shell with charred beams crisscrossed against the sky.

Alex dismounted and wandered about the ruins before returning to his horse. 'There is nowhere to take shelter here. We must ride on,' he said brusquely.

He half-expected his companion to complain, but despite being near to tears with disappointment, hunger and weariness, Rosamund remained silent. She pulled her hood over her hat and huddled inside her cloak and prayed that they would soon come to another inn.

The wind rose and she was glad of the bulwark his body provided. Frantically, she tried to remember whether there were any other places where they could take shelter. For a while nothing occurred to her and no inns hovered into view. At least she could be thankful that the moon had risen. By its light she noticed an odd-shaped escarpment ahead. Suddenly she remembered her father mentioning to William that there were old mine workings in the sandstone that formed the roots of this area.

'Master...' She paused remembering that the stranger had still not introduced himself, and then added, 'No Name, I believe there are caves somewhere around here.' Her voice sounded loud in the eerie silence. 'If I remember rightly, copper used to be mined in this area hundreds of years ago.'

Alex, who had been keeping his eyes peeled for even a hovel, hoped his companion was right. His horse would be too exhausted to travel the following day if they persisted on riding through the night. ‘Can you remember exactly where these caves are, Master Wood?’

Rosamund looked up at the hill in the moonlight. ‘I did not see them myself, but I remember William being told to follow a stream and that there was a shelf of rock a little way up that hill.’

‘We’ll walk and give the horse a rest,’ said Alex, dismounting and holding up a hand. ‘Come, let’s not delay.’

Rosamund placed her small hand in his and slid down from the horse and almost into his arms. Their bodies collided and she withdrew her hand hastily and stepped away from him. At least a walk would warm her up.

‘Stay close,’ murmured Alex, considering not for the first time the smallness of that hand. He seized his horse’s bridle and suggested Master Wood hold on to his cloak so they would not lose each other. Following the sound of running water, he ended up finding the stream by walking into it. He swore in his own tongue and added in English, ‘Step back if you do not want to get your feet wet.’

‘Perhaps I should have kept my mouth shut about caves,’ muttered Rosamund, certain he would be in a bad mood after getting his boot wet.

‘Too late now,’ growled Alex, shaking his foot. ‘Let us not give up. At least there is some moonlight to help us see the way ahead,

although perhaps it is best you stay here with the horse whilst I see what I can discover.'

Rosamund did not want to be left behind, but decided as he seemed to be trusting her with his horse, that she would do as he said.

It was not long before he called down to her. 'I have found a shelf of rock. Let us hope that it is the one you mentioned. Bring my horse and help me search for the caves.'

Rosamund did not need telling twice and was soon standing next to him. They began to search, dislodging small rocks and punctuating the air with the sound of snapping twigs as they looked for an opening. She realised that she was finding a peculiar enjoyment in sharing in the search with him. She wondered what country he came from and whether he had a family waiting for him at home, worrying about him. She recalled his mention of a woman called Ingrid and deduced that, from the way he had spoken about her, that he had once been in love with her, but something had gone wrong, so it was unlikely that he had married her. Perhaps he had married someone else. If so, what was he doing in England, far away from his own country?

It took some searching, but at last Alex found an opening and called her over. He soon discovered that he had to bend himself almost in half to get inside. The cave was pitch-black, but at least it was out of the wind; as his hands searched the rock face, he realised that the wall was gaining in height and soon he was able to stand upright. When he turned and looked towards the

opening, he could see a faint light.

‘Shall I come inside?’ called Rosamund.

‘No, wait there. I will need to come out.’ His voice seemed to bounce off the walls, causing an echo.

He felt his way to the outside and stretched. ‘We need a fire,’ he said.

‘You have flint and steel?’

‘Aye. And tinder. But we will need more kindling and twigs,’ he said.

‘There are plenty of them around,’ said Rosamund. ‘I will gather some up.’

‘Good man,’ he said, squeezing her shoulder and thinking how slender were the bones. ‘This cave will do us for the night.’

She was warmed by his praise—she’d had little of that in her life—and set about gathering twigs. In the meantime he unfastened his saddlebags before removing his saddle and throwing a blanket over his horse. He carried both saddle and saddlebags into the cave and dumped them there before going back outside and helping gather firewood.

When they had collected great armfuls, he told her to take her bundle inside. She obeyed him and was glad to be out of the wind despite the intense velvet blackness inside the cave. She looked towards the faint strip of light and waited for him to follow her. Feeling close to exhaustion, she sank to the ground.

Rosamund did not have long to wait before she heard the sound of flint against steel. She saw sparks and then a flicker of

light in the cave close to the entrance. Tiny flames began to curl about the tinder and she could smell burning. Then the flames grew and eventually there came the crackling of wood. Not long after, it was light enough in the cave for her to see the rosy colour of the sandstone.

‘You’ve done it,’ she said, relieved.

He darted her a glance. ‘Come closer to the fire. I have a pot here and a flagon of ale that I can heat up.’

‘I don’t suppose you have any nutmeg and honey?’ she asked wistfully, pushing back her hood, the better to keep an eye on him. Now she could see more clearly his expression and the attractive planes and angles of his face by the light of the fire.

‘Then you suppose wrong,’ he said. ‘I once worked for a spice merchant and he paid me in cinnamon and nutmeg. You can have no idea how that pleased my grandmother.’ He took several items from one of the saddlebags.

So he had a grandmother. ‘You say you once worked for a spice merchant—what do you do now to earn a living?’ she asked.

‘You could say that I am a jack of all trades. I enjoy travelling and turn my hand to any task to support myself,’ said Alex smoothly. ‘Are you hungry?’

‘Extremely so. But I had resigned myself to go hungry and thirsty this night.’

‘I have a little salted pork, a couple of apples and a hunk of wheaten bread and cheese.’ He smiled good humouredly. ‘A meal fit for a king if one is hungry.’

His smile took her by surprise and she found herself returning his with one of her own and agreeing with him. He seemed less frightening, more approachable than he had done earlier. 'If I had some money, I would buy some food from you,' she said. 'As it is, I left home in some haste, as I told you.'

'I deem you have well earned a meal, so let us not talk of payment. We would still be out in that freezing wind if you had not remembered about this cave.'

Rosamund flushed with pleasure at this second dose of praise. 'We have both contributed to the comfortable place we now find ourselves in,' she said shyly.

The hand holding an apple in mid-air hovered there. 'You consider this comfortable?' He could not conceal his surprise.

'We are warm and dry, are we not?' Her tone was a little on the defensive now. 'You have built the fire so that hopefully most of the smoke will find its way outside.'

Alex said drily, 'You are easily pleased, but I doubt we will be able to keep the fire burning all night.'

'But the cave will hold some heat and we have our cloaks,' said Rosamund, flinging back her own now the heat from the fire was beginning to penetrate the woollen fabric. She wanted it to get to that part of her that still felt chilled.

Alex's growing conviction that this youth was a woman in disguise intensified due to the delightful music in the voice that echoed around the cave. He took the knife strapped to his leg and cut an apple and offered half to his companion.

Rosamund thanked him and bit into the fruit. Her imagination took wing and she thought about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. She grimaced. What nonsense was this? She and this foreigner were not the only man and woman in the world. And probably even if he knew that she was a woman, he would not be tempted to lie with her. Her stepmother and stepbrothers had told her often enough that she was ugly and no man would want her without an enormous dowry—and that was not forthcoming because her father believed she was mad. Tears itched the back of her eyes and she blinked them away.

‘What is it?’ asked Alex.

She started. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Is some smoke getting in your eyes?’

She was amazed that he had noticed that tiny movement and realised that there was little that this man missed. ‘Aye, it is,’ she said gruffly.

‘Obviously it is also affecting your throat.’ His penetrating gaze met hers through the flames.

Rosamund lowered her eyes and was silent.

Having finished his half of the apple and aware that he had unnerved his companion, Alex set about preparing the spiced ale. After grating nutmeg into the liquid and adding half a stick of cinnamon, he stirred it with his knife. Then he poured the ale into a small iron pot before placing it on the fire. He then divided the bread and meat and gave some to her.

She thanked him and bit into the food as if halfstarved. She

was not only grateful for his provision, but surprised by his generosity and capacity for caring for his own needs. It was difficult to imagine her stepbrothers doing what he had done. They had never shared what was theirs with her, but had always expected to be waited on hand and foot. Edward, in particular, had found a perverse pleasure in forcing her to her knees and insisting she remove his boots. She had done so with loathing in her heart, dwelling on the thought that one day she would see him grovel at her feet. Thank God, she had managed to escape from being humiliated in such a way again.

No sooner had she finished eating than Alex offered her a leather cup of steaming ale. 'I have but the one cup, so we will have to share,' he said.

'My thanks,' she said, adding awkwardly, 'I did not think that when we met you would willingly share what was yours with me.'

She felt a need to talk to someone of her suspicions, but although this foreigner might now be showing kindness to her, somehow the words stuck in her throat. She drew her cloak tightly about her and rested her back against a wall before closing her eyes.

Alex drained the cup and drew his own cloak about him and stretched out on the ground with his head against his saddle. Who was his companion? Possibly Sir James had bedded a serving wench who worked at the manor. Yet the attractive musical voice was not that of a servant, so it was possible that Sir James had been as fond of her mother as Alex's natural father claimed

to have been of his mother and seen to it that he was treated like a son or daughter of the house. Unless—his companion was a legal offspring of Sir James! A daughter who resented her stepmother and had raised the lady's wrath by saying her father had been murdered. When threatened, the slightly crazed Mistress Appleby had fled and headed for Lathom House, only to encounter Alex on the way.

It was now that Alex's imagination stalled. His young companion had not behaved as if crazed, although if she were seeking help to prove that her father had been murdered, it would have made more sense to speak to the Lord of Lathom House, the Earl of Derby, and not Lady Elizabeth, but that was women for you. Illogical. They were too often ruled by their emotions. He thought of Ingrid and how she had played him and Harry off against each other as the mood took her. No! He would not torture himself with painful memories.

He decided he would leave his musings there for the moment and catch up on some sleep. From beneath drooping eyelids, he watched his companion, aware of every movement as she sought the most comfortable position on the sandy floor of the cave. Eventually, she fell asleep. For one in fear of her life, who did not trust him, he reckoned she showed a foolish faith in her disguise. Alex made up his mind that, for now, he would play her game, but sooner or later he was going to have to inform her about what was needful to impersonate a man.

Rosamund woke the following morning to a cold and crisp

sunny day. She ached all over, but had slept surprisingly well, considering the discomfort of sleeping on the ground. She glanced across to where Master No Name, as she was beginning to think of him, sat in the shaft of sunlight that flooded through the low opening. Their eyes met and an awareness of his maleness almost overwhelmed her. She wanted to shrink into a corner away from his muscular strength and that penetrating gaze. It made her feel small and vulnerable and intensely feminine. No doubt if he were to discover the truth about her, he would turn away in disgust and abandon her to her fate. Her safety lay in his never knowing what or who she was, so she must keep that constantly in her mind and strut like a youth.

‘You have slept well, Master Wood,’ said Alex, casting aside the folds of his cloak and getting to his feet. ‘But the sun is up and it is time we were on our way.’

She remembered to deepen her voice when she opened her mouth to ask him a question. ‘Do you think there is any chance of us catching up with Lady Elizabeth this day?’

He gave her an odd look and shrugged before lifting his saddle and asking her to carry out his saddlebags. She nodded, but did not immediately follow him, instead relieving herself in a distant corner of the cave. She determined that she would not be lured into telling him anything about herself. She still did not know in what circumstances he had met her father and what information he had wanted from him.

Chapter Three

Rosamund washed her face in the stream outside and then resumed her position on the horse with a determined tilt to her chin.

Alex soon realised that any hope he had of gaining information about Sir James and his stepson in London was firmly quashed. There was little he could do about it without bringing force to bear on his companion and he was reluctant to rekindle the fear in the blue-violet eyes. So he held his peace and prayed that his patience would eventually pay off. His conviction concerning his companion's femininity made it almost impossible for him to give his full attention to the passing landmarks. He had planned on committing them to memory, so that if he needed to travel to the north-west of England again, he would find his way without too much difficulty. The scent of the slender figure and the feel of that small hand against his back triggered his imagination.

He tried not to dwell on there being feminine curves beneath the male garb by forcing himself to concentrate on what part Lady Elizabeth would expect him to play in her troupe of performers. It would not be the first time he had donned the disguise of a player and part of him looked forward to doing so. Hopefully the disguise would serve its purpose in having him accepted by those attending the proxy wedding of Princess

Margaret to James of Scotland at Richmond Palace and would not suspect his real aim in being there. He had committed to memory the names of those whom his father regarded as not only his personal enemies, but those of the proposed peace pact between England and Scotland. Peace between the two countries was essential if the piracy in the northern seas was to be brought to an end. Ships from his own country had discovered to their cost that the buccaneering Scots and English did not always differentiate between ally and enemy. But his task lay more than a sennight ahead and, right now, he would be glad when they came to a town. He was hungry and no doubt his travelling companion was, too.

They had travelled twelve leagues or more that day, stopping only once in Congleton to eat and drink and stretch their legs. As dusk fell they came to a village with but one inn. Alex dismounted and went inside, calling to Rosamund that he would see what were the sleeping arrangements.

Hastily, she slid from the horse and followed him inside and was just in time to hear the innkeeper say that there was only one sleeping chamber available. As they were his only guests, they would have it to themselves and sleeping pallets were included in the charge for the night. Alex had no choice but to accept what was on offer. On hearing the sounds of men roistering in the tap room and being told there was no private parlour available, he said they would eat their supper upstairs.

Rosamund assured herself that sharing a chamber with Master

No Name was no different from sleeping in the cave, but she soon realised that she was deceiving herself. Conscious of several pairs of eyes upon them, she squirmed with embarrassment at having to be dependent on this man to see that she had a roof over her head and food in her stomach.

The innkeeper lit a lantern from a burning candle and handed it to Alex and gave him directions to the stables. He thanked him and went over to Rosamund. He gazed down into her sullen face, noticing the dark rings of weariness beneath the violet eyes. 'You're weary. Why don't you go upstairs and take your ease? I'll tend to the horse.'

Rosamund shook her head. 'I am no weakling. I will help you.' She did not want to be left alone in the inn. She went out into the freezing night and took hold of the horse's bridle and led it towards a huddle of outbuildings that showed up against the darkening sky.

Alex gazed after her, looking for those signs common to her sex. Was he right in believing her to be Sir James's daughter? He noted the swing of her hips and the way she held her head. He considered the possibility of training her as one of his accomplices if he could prove her trustworthy. She certainly seemed to possess some of the traits needed to be a spy by being prepared to set aside the mores of the day by disguising herself as a member of the opposite sex. Something Ingrid would never do; she much preferred donning a nun's outfit or the silken skirts of a lady. Mistress Appleby was obviously desperate and in need of

money—and if she really turned out to be a little crazy after all, perhaps that was necessary when playing such dangerous games as spying. But he was running ahead of himself; she had not yet proved herself trustworthy and he must never forget that he had mistakenly trusted Ingrid to his cost.

Alex set the lantern down on a bench and glanced about the stable. His companion was struggling to unsaddle his horse, but it was obvious she was not accustomed to tending such a large animal, and was finding it difficult. Without a by your leave, he seized her by the elbows and lifted her out of the way. ‘Leave this to me, Master Wood. You fetch some water,’ he ordered.

Rosamund bit back a retort and looked about her for a bucket. She picked one up and went outside to where she had noticed a water trough. She scooped up as much water as she could, only to stagger beneath its weight when she lifted it up. She entered the stable, carrying the bucket with both hands.

Alex moved swiftly to relieve her of her burden. ‘Allow me,’ he said in a voice that brooked no argument.

Rosamund had no choice but to hand it over to him, though could not resist saying, ‘I know you are the stronger man, but I could have managed it, you know.’

Alex realised his mistake in rushing to her aid and instantly tried to rectify it. ‘Why must you be on the defensive, young Master Wood? We have both had a long day and are weary. Get inside and leave me to finish tending my own horse.’

Rosamund did not move, remembering the noise of the men

drinking in the tap room. What if one were to come out and pick a fight with her? 'I would rather wait here,' she said.

Alex shrugged. 'Please yourself. I am not your keeper.'

Are you not? she almost said.

Alex decided to test her. 'Do you have a mother?'

'She is dead. Died when I was just a child. What about you?'

Alex decided that it should do no harm telling her a little about himself—it might encourage her to talk more. 'My mother died shortly after I was born.'

'So who looked after you?'

'A wet nurse and my grandparents.' Alex recalled his grandmother telling him that his mother, Maria Nilsson, had gone to Scotland in the train of Princess Margaret of Denmark on the occasion of her marriage to Scotland's then king. She was a widow and the Earl Douglas already married when they met. Apparently the affair had lasted several years. Maria had given birth to him in Scotland and he had been named Alexander Christian. His mother had died a week later.

'What about your father?'

The muscles of Alex's face stiffened, remembering as a boy asking his grandparents about his father. They had told him that Christian Nilsson had been a mighty soldier, killed in a battle with the Danes before Alex was born. He had grown up, believing himself to be the son of a Swedish soldier hero, and was proud of the fact. He had been devastated when he had discovered that he was Earl Douglas's bastard instead of the son of the Swedish

hero.

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ said Rosamund softly. She had been watching his expression and hazarded that his thoughts were not happy ones.

‘My father had naught to do with my upbringing,’ he said tersely. ‘I was reared by my grandparents in Sweden.’

‘So you are Swedish,’ said Rosamund, satisfied that she now knew where he came from. ‘I have heard that the sun scarcely rises there in the winter.’

Alex made no comment, only saying, ‘You can go inside now. I’ll only be a moment here. Perhaps you can carry the saddlebags.’

She was disappointed that he was not prepared to tell her more about his country. She hastened to pick up the saddlebags and managed to sling them over her shoulder in what she deemed a manly fashion.

Alex rolled his eyes and picked up the saddle. ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m famished, Master Wood.’

She agreed that she was hungry and followed him out and remained hard on his heels as they crossed the darkened stable yard. Alex had a word with the innkeeper before leading the way upstairs.

The sleeping chamber was not as large as she had imagined and the air was exceeding chilly. She soon discovered that the pallet and blanket were damp, but did not comment, unlike Alex. ‘This will not do,’ he muttered, bundling pallets and blankets beneath his arm and leaving her alone in the darkened

bedchamber. She would have followed him, but the thought of facing the raucous crowd downstairs was enough for her to stay put. She perched on his saddle and hoped he would not be too long.

Rosamund had no idea how long she was there before she heard someone coming upstairs. Instantly, she rose to her feet and went to open the door. A buxom woman stood there, carrying a lantern in one hand and a pitcher in the other. 'Here you are, young master.'

'Thank you,' said Rosamund gruffly, taking both from her.

The woman entered the sleeping chamber. 'Your mate is making a right fuss downstairs. Yer'd think he owned the bloody place. A furriner, too. He wants to watch his step.'

'The pallets and blankets were damp,' said Rosamund, placing the lantern and pitcher on the floor. 'He paid good money for hiring this chamber.'

The woman sniggered and brushed against her. 'There's more than one way of keeping warm, young master.' She placed a hand on Rosamund's thigh.

Shocked, Rosamund reacted by pushing her away. 'Get out of here,' she said roughly.

'Oh, we've a haughty one here, have we? Or are yer one of them?' She placed a hand on her hip and swayed about the room.

Rosamund watched her uneasily. 'I don't know what you mean. Will you leave!'

The woman ignored her and went over to the saddlebags on

the floor. ‘What have we in here?’

Rosamund rushed over to her. ‘Leave them alone! They’re not your property.’

‘What is going on here?’ said Alex.

Rosamund felt a rush of relief as she whirled round to see him standing in the doorway. She noticed that he had slung the bedding over his shoulder and carried a tray. ‘This woman is being offensive,’ she said stiffly.

He thrust the tray at Rosamund, but before he could lay a hand on the woman she scuttled past him and out of the door. Alex slammed it behind her and locked it. He dropped the bedding on the floor and stared at Rosamund. ‘What did she do?’

Her cheeks reddened. ‘I’d rather not say.’ She breathed in the appetising smell of the broth and placed the tray on the floor. ‘Now you’re here, she’ll not come back.’

Alex had some idea of what the serving wench might have said to her and thought that must have given *Master Wood* a fright. ‘I had the innkeeper’s wife air the bedding in front of her fire. She was willing to do so for an extra penny.’

‘I am not surprised,’ said Rosamund. ‘One can buy a lot for a penny.’

Alex realised he had made a mistake by revealing he was not short of money. ‘I deemed it worth it and we did not have to pay for our shelter last night. As for that wench, she was no one of importance, so you can forget aught that she said.’ He took off his hat and his fair hair seemed to glow in the lantern light.

Her breath caught in her throat and for a moment she could only stare at that handsome leonine head. Then she pulled herself together and went over to the pallets and rolled them out several feet from each other on each side of the tray.

Alex picked up the lantern and pitcher and put them close by so they could see what they were eating and removed his gloves. 'The broth smells good,' he said.

She agreed and removed her own gloves, but decided against taking off her hat. She lowered herself on to the pallet and eased off her boots before reaching for one of the bowls. She placed it at her side on the wooden floor.

Alex glanced her way and noticed that the lantern cast light on her weary face with its delicate nose and generously curved lips. He considered how not a word of complaint had escaped her that day and could not help but admire her stamina. He reached for the jug of mulled wine and poured her a drink and decided to test her further.

'Have you ever paid court to a woman, Master Wood?' he asked casually.

Rosamund was in the act of tearing bread from the loaf and almost dropped it. She paused. 'No. I do not have the means to support a wife...and besides, I doubt a woman would find me to her taste.'

'Why? You've a handsome face,' said Alex, pushing the cup across the floor to her.

Rosamund looked at him in astonishment before picking

up the cup and taking a thirsty gulp of the warm liquid. 'My stepbrothers told me I was ugly. I confess I am not in the habit of gazing at myself in a looking glass.'

'You are an extremely modest young man if you can resist preening in front of a mirror. Most youths of your age are obsessed by the growth on their faces.' He dipped his spoon into the bowl of barley broth and waited for her reaction.

Rosamund's stomach clenched. She had given no thought to the male need to shave. 'I am not most youths,' she muttered.

'I would agree,' said Alex smoothly. 'How old are you?'

She hesitated and decided it would serve her best to not give her proper age. 'I have seen eighteen summers.'

'Then you are young to know much about women or to have a beard.'

'I know enough about them to know what they want from a man,' she retorted without thinking.

Her reply amused him and he gave one of his rare smiles. 'Your confidence amazes me. I am twenty-eight years old and I reckon I will find women difficult to understand till the day I die.'

Rosamund realised her mistake in giving such a confident answer. She picked up her spoon with unsteady fingers. 'You don't have a wife?'

'No. I enjoy travelling too much to give much thought to marriage. Although, one day I will need to settle down, for I would like to have children. But not yet.'

'Tell me, do you consider women greatly inferior to men and

good for nought but keeping house and bearing babies?’

Alex wondered who had said that to her. ‘Is it not a woman’s role to keep house and give her husband children? Even my grandmother believed that was only right. She was an intelligent woman who organised the family business when both my grandfather and I were away from home. She was wont to say that it was in her blood, for it was what the womenfolk of the Vikings of old had to do when their men were away for months—even years, sometimes. Unfortunately, except for my mother, all her children died in infancy.’

‘How sad,’ murmured Rosamund, dunking bread in her soup. ‘I was told that the Vikings were bloodthirsty warriors who raided our coast.’ She shot him a challenging look.

‘Ach! The Danes and Norsemen might have been warriors, but according to my grandmother, who has Danish blood, they were also farmers, fishermen and traders. Their womenfolk had to be strong, not knowing if their husbands or sons would ever return. They had to be both mother and father to their children. Our folklore speaks of many a mythical heroine who bested the men.’

‘The men must not have liked that,’ said Rosamund, encouraged by hearing of such brave women.

‘The men transformed some women into monsters when they told their tales round their fires in the great halls. I remember hearing of the Valkyries, or Odin’s Maids as they are also named.’ His eyes darkened as he remembered Ingrid referring to herself

as one such maid—that was when she was not boasting of being a descendent of Lady Ingeborg Knutsdotter.

Rosamund smiled. ‘I would hear more of them. I know of Odin. My brother used to tell me tales of the old gods when I was a child. Of Thor and his hammer and how he—’ She stopped abruptly and looked confused. ‘I had forgotten about that until you reminded me. How strange.’

‘The mind has a habit of throwing up the unexpected,’ he said softly. ‘Do not let it disturb you. It has happened to me often since I received that blow on the head that rendered me unconscious. Do you remember aught else about your brother?’

‘I was told that he had drowned.’ She hesitated. ‘For years I had dreams in which I saw him being carried away, but my stepmother said I was hallucinating and quite mad. There have been times when I wished that I had died like my mother and brother.’

Alex frowned. ‘You should never wish death upon yourself. Life is for living, however painful it might be.’

She flushed. ‘I know such thoughts are sinful, but my life was difficult after their deaths. I have long believed Lady Monica hated me because of my mother.’

Alex reflected on the selfishness of parents and the vulnerability of children. Had Sir James been aware of Lady Monica’s treatment of his daughter? He remembered her mention of stepbrothers.

‘What about Lady Monica’s sons?’ he asked.

Suddenly Rosamund realised that she had been talking too much and wondered if the question was meant to trick her. She knew so little about this foreigner, not even his name. 'I have said enough,' she murmured, wondering what it was about this man that had so loosened her tongue—or perhaps it was the wine that had done that?

Alex would have liked to have continued the conversation, but decided that tomorrow would be soon enough to resume their conversation. So he ate his supper; when she had finished eating, he removed the tray. He returned to discover that she had fallen asleep curled up in her cloak, and seeing her so vulnerable, his instincts were to protect her. Then he told himself he must not allow his feelings to soften too much towards her. He already knew her to be a liar. Yet he found himself picking up the blanket folded at the foot of her pallet and covering her with it. Then he placed his saddlebags between them, settled himself on his own pallet and almost immediately fell asleep.

Rosamund woke, feeling snug and comfortable until she realised that she was using the Swedish man's saddlebags as a pillow. There was also a weight on her chest and a heaviness on her hip. She started up in fright and attempted to move her sleeping companion's hand without waking him.

Alex was having a nightmare and surfaced from fathoms deep, believing himself under attack. His hand curled on a slender hose-clad thigh and he struggled to free his other one that was being held. He dragged his hand free and the next moment had

drawn his dagger and was astride his assailant with the blade against his throat.

Rosamund squealed and dug her fingernails into the back of his hand. 'I beg you don't kill me! I have no weapon!'

Alex paused, blinked and stared down into the panicstricken face. Now he was aware of the curve of a very feminine hip against his thigh and felt a stirring in his loins. He watched the soft lips part and the tip of her tongue dart nervously along her upper lip and felt an overwhelming urge to plunder her mouth with lips and tongue. A long moment passed and he could feel the pulse in her neck racing against his fingers. The blueviolet eyes appeared larger than usual as they entreated him not to hurt her. He loosened his grip and backed away. Deeply disturbed by the feelings she had roused in him, he moved away from her over to the window.

A stupefied Rosamund could scarcely believe that from being convinced he might kill her, several heartthudding moments later, she was persuaded that he had been about to kiss her. What madness was that? Surely if she had betrayed herself and he knew her to be a woman, then he would have turned away in disgust? She told herself that it might yet happen.

Warily, she gazed at his back and then her scrutiny lowered to his tapering waist and then even lower. She stared at the length of his long, muscular legs in the tightly fitting hose as he stood there, unmoving for several moments. Then he shook his head, yawned and stretched. Transfixed, she watched the hem of his

shirt ride up over his thighs to reveal the swell of his buttocks beneath the hose. Blushing fiercely, she turned her back on him.

When face to face with him once more, it was to see that he had donned doublet and boots. 'We've slept too long,' he said, averting his eyes from her flushed face. 'Get yourself up, Master Wood.'

Rosamund wasted no time in doing so. 'Does the late hour and such haste mean that we do not have time to break our fast?' she asked gruffly.

'We'll eat in the saddle,' he replied. 'I'll speak to the innkeeper about food and then fetch the horse.'

She nodded, wondering what it would have felt like to be kissed by him. Immediately she felt ashamed of herself for thinking such thoughts. He believed her to be a youth and she was wicked to even consider it. Besides, the only kisses she had experienced were those forced upon her by Edward and he had crushed her teeth against her inner lip so that it bled. Kissing was no fun and she still knew so little about this Swede.

Rosamund locked the door so she could tend to a desperate need in the chamber pot before hurrying downstairs, thinking how much easier attending certain bodily needs were for men. She was on her way to the stables when she saw her travelling companion coming towards her. He was leading his horse and carrying what appeared to be a pillion seat in the other hand. 'I have purchased this from the innkeeper,' he said. 'I will fix it on to my horse and it will be more comfortable for you. We will

stop to eat after we have a good few miles behind us.'

Her brow puckered, and reluctantly she said, 'We will not make much speed sharing the same horse. You'll reach London the swifter without me. Why do you not go on ahead without me?'

Alex was annoyed by her suggestion and thought he knew what had caused it. 'No,' he said tersely. 'You scarcely managed to cope with that woman last night. What if you were set upon by thieves? I reckon we will still arrive in the city in time for the business I have to tend to there. Besides, I deem you could be of use to me when we reach London.'

She was surprised. 'In what way can I be of use to you?'

'I will tell you when I know you better.'

'You know more about me than I do you,' she retorted. 'Do you not think it is time I have a name by which to call you?'

Alex studied her features. 'Why?'

'You address me as Master Wood as is polite, but you are Master No Name and that does not seem right to me.'

He hesitated. 'My name is Master Nilsson and my home is in Gotland, Sweden.'

Rosamund smiled. 'I recognise the name of the place. My father imported furs, amber-and-silver goods from your northern climes, although he complained about having trouble with Scottish pirates, as well as the Hanseatic League due to the latter's monopoly of trade in the Baltic.'

'Aye. I have experienced trouble with pirates myself,' he said drily.

‘You have?’ She would like to know more.

He looked thoughtful as he busied himself attaching the pillion seat to his horse. Then he seized her by the waist, causing her to squeal as he lifted her up on to the pillion seat.

She clung to the wooden arms. ‘Why could you not have allowed me to climb into the seat myself?’ she asked in a breathless voice, aware of a pleasurable tremor that she could only believe was the result of his actions.

‘It was quicker my way,’ said Alex. ‘What of your stepbrother who lives in London?’

‘Oh, he never complains of being troubled with pirates,’ she said blandly.

‘How fortunate.’ And how suspicious, thought Alex.

Rosamund thought Master Nilsson’s mouth tightened as he dragged himself into the saddle and guessed she was not going to discover any more about pirates from him. Which was vexatious—there were conversations she had overheard that could have interested him.

Chapter Four

Now Rosamund had the security of the pillion seat, she no longer needed to cling to Master Nilsson for safety and would be able to keep her distance from him.

Alex was also thinking that the pillion seat was money well spent. No longer would he be disturbed by thoughts of the wench's soft body brushing his back and those small hands holding on to him so she would not fall. Which meant he could concentrate on considering why her stepbrother had no trouble with pirates. This caused him to consider with which countries he traded. It was possible that he had no interest in his stepfather's markets and instead did business with southern Europe and Africa, so his ships did not risk crossing the northern seas.

Having come to that conclusion, Alex let his mind drift to thoughts of the blonde and beautiful Ingrid Wrangel and the message she had brought him from Harry the morning after Sir James had asked about Harry, saying that the young man reminded him of someone he had known in the past. If Alex had not been distracted just then, he would have asked Sir James for more information. As it was, Alex had not seen him or Harry again that evening. Then had come the message and he had hastened to Cheapside, where the Royal Company of Mercers had their headquarters, in response to its summons. Apparently Harry had information concerning a stolen cargo belonging to

Alex. There he was attacked in a cowardly fashion so that he did not even catch sight of his attacker. The only proof he had that his erstwhile friend had been there was a silver amulet of Thor's hammer reworked into the shape of a cross that he had bent down to pick up.

Fortunately a member of the Royal Company of Mercers had found the unconscious Alex with the amulet still clenched in his hand. He'd had him carried to the monastic hospital that was part of the building. There the monks had nursed him back to health until he was well enough to return to Sweden, having received a missive informing him that his grandmother was dying.

His thoughts were interrupted by a question from his companion. 'Do you visit London often, Master Nilsson?'

'Whenever it is necessary,' he replied, wondering what was behind her question.

'Have you ever met the Lord Mayor?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because I am interested in your answer.'

'No, I have not.'

'A pity. I would have liked to have known your opinion on what kind of man makes a good Lord Mayor of London. Perhaps you have heard of Richard Whittington, who was a member of the Royal Company of Mercers and filled the position several times?'

'I can't say that I have.' Despite his denial, Alex was alert to any information to do with the Royal Company of Mercers. 'What

is your interest?’

‘It is my stepbrother’s ambition to be Lord Mayor of London and he is a member of that exalted company. From what I have heard, it takes a plentiful supply of funds to become Lord Mayor,’ said Rosamund.

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘I am not suggesting anything,’ she answered in a colourless voice.

Alex guessed that she was doing exactly that, but showing caution. She wanted him to ponder on her words and come to a conclusion that might match her own. ‘What is your stepbrother’s name?’

‘I would rather not say at this moment. If you have met Sir James, then perhaps you can work that out for yourself, too.’

‘I suspect, Master Wood, you are playing games with me.’

‘I would not dare, Master Nilsson,’ she said, sounding horrified that he should consider such a thought. ‘But there is always the possibility,’ she could not resist adding mischievously.

‘Do not push my patience too far, Master Wood,’ warned Alex.

‘I hear you and obey. I will not plague you any more,’ said Rosamund meekly. ‘I feel a megrim coming on so I will be silent.’

Alex was not sure if he believed in her megrim, but he hoped that she would keep her word and leave him to his thoughts that now concerned a stepbrother whose stepfather was Sir James Appleby and who was a member of the Royal Company of Mercers and was in need of lots of money to fund his ambitions.

He was not bothered by pirates, unlike his stepfather, and *Master Wood* suspected Sir James had been murdered. Was she saying that the prime suspect for his murder was her stepbrother? It seemed extremely likely. Well, it shouldn't be too difficult for him to discover the identity of Sir James's stepson once he reached London. But did any of this have aught to do with Harry and Sir James's words about a likeness to someone he had known in the past?

As the day wore on, the pain in Rosamund's head increased and her whole body ached. She worried in case Master Nilsson thought she was quite mad, playing games with him instead of giving him straight answers. She did not really believe that he was in the pay of her stepbrother, but how was she to know for certain?

The miles fell behind them until, just before dusk, they stopped at an inn a short distance south of Stafford. By then Rosamund's head was thumping and she had stomach cramps. As she dismounted, her knees buckled and she would have fallen if Alex had not been there to lift her upright. For a moment she rested her weary body against the strong line of his and was glad of his arm about her. Then with a start of fright, she realised she was behaving like a woman and drew away from him.

By means of clinging on to the horse's bridle, she managed to remain on her feet, but her gait was unsteady and she felt sick. Yet she insisted on leading the horse to the stable.

Once again Alex watched her with admiration. They had spent

hours on horseback and there had been no word of complaint from her. He was not surprised she was exhausted. He wasted no time going inside the inn. It was a finer one than that in which they had stayed last night and he was able to obtain a private bedchamber with a proper bed. He asked for a fire to be lit and supper prepared for them. Then, carrying a lantern, he headed for the stables where he found Rosamund resting against a stall with her eyes closed. He took one look at her face, which appeared to have lost all colour and was damp with perspiration, and told her to get to the inn and rest.

‘But I have not...’ she began.

‘Never mind that. Tell the innkeeper to show you up to our bedchamber.’ His tone was harsh.

‘You’re angry with me because you believe I am playing games with you. Perhaps you believe I am mad,’ cried Rosamund in dismay.

‘Not now,’ said Alex sharply.

She made to continue, but he roared, ‘Get yourself inside and to bed before you collapse!’

Rosamund shrank away from him and stumbled outside and threw up behind some bushes. She felt a little better after that and, despite being near to tears and aching all over, she managed to reach their bedchamber without falling. She peeled off her outer clothes and, with a sense of doom and horror, discovered blood on her nether male undergarment. She must have miscounted the days to when her next monthly courses were

due. What was she going to do now? She had never been in such a dilemma before and, for a moment, was at a loss how to deal with the situation. Then common sense asserted itself and she locked the door.

Hastily she took off her shirt and began to remove the binding that constrained her breasts. Tearing a length of the material, she made it into a pad and placed it inside the nether garment. Then she put on her shirt and hose before ripping up more of the binding and placing them with her cloak and doublet before climbing into bed. She curled up on one side of it and fell into an exhausted sleep.

When Alex arrived outside the bedchamber it was to discover that the door was locked. He knocked at the wooden panel gently, but there came no sound from within. Had he frightened her so much by roaring at her earlier that she was scared he would hurt her? He tapped again and called, 'Master Wood, of your courtesy, open the door?'

But still there was no response and, due to the utter silence, he concluded that his travelling companion had fallen asleep. He went downstairs and told the innkeeper that he had changed his mind and would have supper in the parlour. As for Master Wood, he had fallen asleep and perhaps it was best not to disturb him.

Rosamund woke hours later. The candle had guttered out and the fire was but dead embers. She remembered locking the door and guessed that most likely Master Nilsson had remained downstairs to spend the night in discomfort. A groan escaped her.

She had not intended keeping him from his bed. Had he decided that she had deliberately locked him out for losing his temper with her? But why had he not banged on the door to waken her?

Perhaps he had done so and she had not heard him. No doubt he was furious with her. Was it time she parted company with him? What had he thought of her suggestions? What interests did a so-called Swedish jack of all trades have in London after having visited Lathom House and seeking out her father? A man whom he had told her that he had only met once. And what was happening on the twenty-second of the month that he needed to be in London?

The cramps in her stomach had eased a little and she replaced the pad, anguishing over this evidence of her femininity. Despite the soreness beneath and her aching back, she managed to pull on her boots and buttoned up her doublet. She put on her hat and fastened her cloak and, picking up her pitifully few bindings, as well as the soiled one, she let herself out of the bedchamber and crept downstairs.

All was quiet as she drew back the bolts and peered outside. There was a pearly light in the sky towards the east, which meant it would soon be dawn. She went and dug a hole in the soil near the stable with a stick and buried the soiled cloth. Then she washed her hands in the horse trough before returning to the inn. She found her way to the kitchen and went over to the larder and took a hunk of bread and cut slices of ham from the joint there. Then she let herself outside again.

The freezing air seemed determined to take bites out of her face. Nevertheless, she pulled up her hood before hurrying across the yard to the stable.

She was in the act of trying to saddle up Alex's horse when a voice from behind said, 'And where are you going so early in the morning, Master Wood, and in such haste?' Her heart seemed to somersault as she turned to face the man silhouetted in the doorway.

'Have you no answer for me, little thief?' asked Alex coldly.

Rosamund took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. 'I am not a thief. I was just trying to have everything ready for when you came out. I thought you would be tired after my accidentally locking you out of the bedchamber. I beg pardon for doing so.' She swallowed nervously. 'I also knew that you would want to make an early start, knowing that my presence on your horse has lengthened the time of your journey.'

Alex was confounded. 'Are you being honest with me?'

'Why should I speak falsely?'

'Because you are scared,' he said bluntly. 'You ask much of me. I want to believe that you did not intend to steal my horse and escape, but give me a further reason why I should do so?'

'I will be honest with you and admit that I have deceived you.'

Alex's heart began to thud. Was she about to tell him that she was a woman? 'What is the manner of your deception?'

Rosamund's lips parted, but the words would not come and she despised herself for being a coward. Moments passed and

Alex reached out and drew her towards him. 'What is wrong? Is the truth so terrible that you do not have the courage to reveal it?'

She nodded wordlessly, conscious that her breasts were crushed against his chest. Perhaps she would not need to speak because surely he could not be unaware of them and would guess her secret.

Alex was indeed aware that her breasts appeared to have sprouted overnight and to his astonishment his arousal was instant and he wanted to take her there and then in the straw. He imagined her expression if he should do so and instantly released her. He did not want such a complication in his life. 'I am disappointed that you still cannot be honest with me. I see you consider me no friend?'

She found her voice. 'How can I consider you a friend when I know so little about you?'

'I have given you a name and told you where I come from. You know that I like travelling and am a jack of all trades.'

'That is still not a lot of information when it comes to giving someone your trust,' said Rosamund.

Alex could not prevent a smile. 'You're not so crazed as your stepfamily seemed to want you to believe, Master Appleby.'

Rosamund started and a tiny laugh escaped her. 'How clever of you to guess my secret.'

Alex's smile deepened. Perhaps he should not blame her for wanting to continue to conceal her true identity from him. 'You gave yourself away on several occasions.'

‘I would not make a very good conspirator, would I?’

‘I disagree. You have deduced that it is not always safe to tell strangers your secrets and to answer a question with a question.’

Rosamund agreed.

‘But of course, in providing me with the information that you have, I have come to the conclusion that you believe your stepbrother murdered your father.’

She hesitated. ‘Would you say that is a sensible conclusion to draw?’

He nodded. ‘But I would add that if you are Sir James’s son, then surely you should be in charge of Appleby Manor and his business in London, not your stepfamily.’

Rosamund was silent.

Alex said abruptly, ‘We will leave this for now. It is time we were on our way.’

Rosamund lifted her head and stared at him. ‘I have some food I have taken from the kitchen as I missed supper—shall we eat it later?’

He nodded. ‘Let us put some miles behind us.’

Whilst he was saddling up his horse, she went and fetched the pillion seat. They had travelled a few miles when Rosamund said, ‘What was your opinion of my father?’

He glanced over his shoulder at her sombre face. ‘As I told you, I met him but the once.’

‘Where?’

‘Down at the quayside,’ answered Alex carefully. ‘We were

watching ships being unloaded. It was then he spotted the young captain of the *Thor's Hammer*. He said he reminded him of someone he had known in a past life.'

Rosamund said, 'What a strange comment to make. Did he say whom this captain reminded him of?'

'No. And I have not seen either of them since then.'

'Perhaps your young captain is dead.'

Her words gave him a shock. 'That I have not considered.'

'Why? If he is a seafarer, then it is a possibility, is it not?'

Alex could not deny it. 'I sense he is alive,' he said abruptly.

'Why, if you have not seen him? Would you have expected to have seen him during the time that has passed since you last did so?'

'In the circumstances, no.'

'What circumstances are these?'

He gave her an exasperated look. 'It is I who ask the questions.'

'I have already answered several of yours,' she said.

'Then answer me this one,' said Alex. 'Give me the name of your stepbrother in London.'

She sighed. 'I cannot understand your interest if you are but a travelling jack of all trades. I deem, Master Nilsson, that you are not being honest with me.'

'I admit it, but I still want an answer to my question,' he said in a steely voice.

'Can't it wait until we reach London?'

'No! I have much to do when I arrive there,' he said, hanging

on to his patience.

‘Then if I must, I must. I just pray to our Lady and all the saints that I can trust you, Master Nilsson. His name is Edward Fustian.’

Fustian! Alex had met the man and considered him a smarmy, arrogant, insular fellow. He had a certain attraction for the ladies, which irritated Alex exceedingly. He had heard it from Ingrid that he beat his wife and treated her like dirt beneath his feet. Yet he had not thought to include him in the names on the list of those he suspected might be guilty of passing on information about cargoes and times of departure of ships sailing from the port of London.

‘I have met him, but do not know him well,’ said Alex. ‘I have heard he is not kind to his wife.’

Rosamund nodded and said in a seething voice, ‘She had several bruises last time I saw her. She was a cowed little woman and so were her daughters. I felt so sorry for her because I understood what she was going through.’

‘Could you not have helped her?’

‘I would have liked to, but you have not met my stepmother, Master Nilsson, or grown up with Edward.’

‘Tell me about it.’

Rosamund took a deep breath. ‘I thought at first that Edward might prove to be another brother to me. He is some five years older and at first he showed me some kindness, but it was not long before he revealed his true colours.’ Her voice

quivered. ‘Overbearing, arrogant and swift to lash out at me with his tongue and fist.’ The memory she had buried burst forth and she remembered, when first she had shown signs of early womanhood, how Edward had whispered lewd suggestions in her ear and pulled up her skirts. She took a shuddering breath. ‘I wish I’d had the courage to kill him.’

Aware that she was deeply disturbed, Alex said, ‘You do not have to continue if you find speaking of it upsetting.’

‘No. I deem there is a purpose in your questioning. If somehow you could bring Edward to his knees, then I would do anything to help you.’

‘Is that a promise?’

‘In as much as I will be able to keep it.’

‘Was he never chided?’ he rasped.

‘He was always careful not to misbehave when my father was there. Fortunately there came a day when he was caught out and despatched to serve his apprenticeship in Father’s business. I was never so glad of anything in my life. Although that was not the end of it. My stepmother was furious because she was in favour of a match between us, but she could not persuade Father into her way of thinking. That made her even angrier with me, but I pretended to be a fool and allowed her to treat me like one. I discovered a long time ago that, if I remained quietly in a corner, people would forget I was there and carry on all kinds of conversations with no thought to whom might be listening.’

Alex was impressed by her perception, even as he was aware

that she had let two nuggets of information slip. She had touched on a match between herself and Edward and mentioned that she had thought he would be like another brother to her. Had she realised she had just revealed to him that she was a woman? Also, that was twice she had referred to a brother. How long was it since she had lost her brother? How and when had he died? Why should her stepmother wish for a match between her son and the stepdaughter she believed crazy? Was it that she had persuaded her husband that he should not leave his property to his daughter and instead make her son his heir? Was it possible that she believed her son's position precarious and that was why she had suggested a match between the two? Obviously she had overplayed her hand. He wished that he could have met the lady so as to draw his own conclusions.

‘What else have you learnt by your eavesdropping?’ he asked.

She replied promptly, ‘That the Hanseatic League’s monopoly of trade in the Baltic infuriates Edward.’

That did not surprise Alex, for it angered most merchants who wanted to buy into such markets themselves. He asked her no more questions, deciding that a little silence would give them both time for reflection. He would like to know about her brother and how he had died, but that information could wait. They were still many leagues from London.

When they came to the next inn, Rosamund was too weary to attempt to converse with Master Nilsson. Indeed, she decided she had given him enough information about her stepfamily.

Fortunately, he seemed in no mood to talk further; as it happened that night they were not alone in a sleeping chamber, but shared it with other travellers.

The next day she expected him to ask her more questions about Edward or Harry, but to her surprise he enquired instead about her other stepbrother.

The question startled her. 'William! You want to know about William?'

'Why not? Surely you have something to tell me about him?'

Rosamund's hands tightened on the pillion seat as she considered what he would make of her answer. She decided that it should be safe enough to speak honestly of William. 'He is a lack-wit, but one wonders if that is the fault of his mother. She is for ever hitting him across the head and comparing him to his elder brother. Yet he will do anything for her and his brother, which is a big mistake.'

'Why is that?'

'They are bad examples of how a decent man should behave. I feel sorry for the poor girl who is destined to marry him.'

'Who is this maiden?'

'I know only that her name is Bridget and that she is a niece to a close kinsman of my stepmother.'

'Your younger stepbrother takes no interest in your stepbrother's business?'

Rosamund shook her head. 'He does not have the wit.'

'Then who oversees Appleby Manor?'

‘My stepmother,’ she said bitterly. ‘She persuaded my father I was incapable of doing so.’

‘That must have infuriated you.’

‘Indeed it did, but Father had no faith in my abilities. He believed my stepmother’s estimation of my character.’

‘Does your anger extend to him?’

Rosamund did not answer.

Alex did not press her. It was obvious that Mistress Appleby had been sorely treated by not only her stepfamily, but also her father. He recalled Sir James Appleby gazing up at Harry and the words he had spoken. Was the loss of his son reason enough for a father to treat his daughter so thoughtlessly? He set out to entertain her for the rest of the journey.

During the day he talked about the countries he had visited and told her about the ways he had kept body and soul together. He spoke of playing in a troupe of entertainers and made her laugh by telling her jests and describing some of the japes and dances they performed. He found himself enjoying sharing such tales with her. He spoke of Sweden and the beauty of its countryside and the splendour of its cities. Yet he never mentioned his title or wealth or the task his father had set him. He was only prepared to trust Mistress Appleby so far.

As for Rosamund, she was made only more wary by the change in him. Why was he trying to charm her? It was quite a struggle to resist him. Sometimes on wakening there was a moment when they turned over and their faces were but a foot

away and they caught the other's eye. Then she thought she saw an expression in his face that melted her insides, but she fought against such feelings.

Chapter Five

By the time they arrived at St Albans, a town where two great battles had been fought between the Houses of Lancaster and York, she was feeling the strain of pretending that she was a man and she knew that she had to get away from Master Nilsson. This despite the promise she had voiced to bring Edward to his knees. For the last time on that journey, she went inside an inn and upstairs to the bedchamber that once again he arranged for them. The room was cold and she thought how often she would have liked to snuggle up to him and share his warmth and feel his strong arms holding her secure, but she told herself that this was confused thinking.

A sigh escaped her. Tomorrow they would arrive in London and she would need to find her godmother's house. The thought lifted her heart. She might be uncertain of its whereabouts, but she could ask for directions; surely if her godmother had sent a servant to enquire about her, then she should be pleased to see her. The trouble was that after being on the road for so many days, wearing the same garments, she was travel-stained and smelly. The worry of it all quite made her lose her appetite and imbibe more wine than usual.

‘Ach! Master Appleby, you haven’t eaten enough to keep a sparrow alive,’ said Alex, staring across the table at the slender face made rosy by wind and wintry sun. ‘You have proved your

stamina equal to mine in the last few days, so what is it that has ruined your taste for food now we are nearing journey's end?"

"Would you say I have proved myself as good as many a man?" The words were slurred as she swirled the mulled wine in her cup.

Alex's eyes narrowed. "There is no need for you to prove yourself to me. Although I suppose in the circumstances it is natural for you to do so."

"What circumstances?" she muttered, staring at him from beneath drooping eyelids as she reached for the wine.

He did not answer her question, but moved the pitcher beyond her reach. "You will want a clear head when you reach London," he said.

"London," she uttered drowsily. "There all will change between us." She yawned and closed her eyes and her head nodded.

Alex reached forward and cupped her chin before her face could land in the bowl of soup. He stood up, eased himself around the table and managed to place an arm beneath her knees. He lifted her and carried her over to the bed. There he drew back the bedcovers and laid her down before tucking them in round her. Then he went and sat in a chair and brooded on their situation and what to do when they arrived in London. Would she volunteer the truth at last?

He reached for his cloak and wrapped it round him and prepared himself for a long night.

At some point he must have dozed off, because he was roused by the sound of a woman sobbing. Forcing his eyelids open, he

pushed himself out of the chair and went over to the bed.

‘What is troubling you?’ he asked gently.

She did not respond, but continued to weep. By the dying light of the fire he could see that her eyes were still closed. Suddenly, she ceased crying and, instead, started to speak. He lowered his head in an attempt to catch the words.

‘Harry, where are you, Harry? Where are they taking you? Don’t leave me alone with her!’ Her voice dropped and he had to bring his head even closer to hers. ‘Papa, listen to me. It was not my fault! I wanted to save Mama, but she would not let me near her. She would force that vile potion down my throat and Edward stood watching and laughing.’ She fell silent a moment and then she spoke again. ‘Edward, keep away from me! Do not touch me! It is wrong!’ she cried. ‘Papa, listen to me. I am telling the truth. I am not mad. Oh, why don’t you believe me? Why can’t you love me like you did Harry and Mama?’ Suddenly she sat up and Alex had to draw away from her. Her hat fell off, along with her cap, and her dark hair tumbled about her shoulders. A small hand shot out and seized hold of Alex. ‘You must find Harry!’ she cried.

Alex was deeply disturbed by her distress. ‘You need not fear. I will find him,’ he assured her.

‘Good,’ she murmured, subsiding.

Only when he thought she had fallen asleep again did Alex make a move to remove the hand that rested on his thigh. Her fingers tightened about his and she rolled over and rested her head against his leg. He could not resist stroking her hair or

brushing her lips with his own. She let out a wine-scented breath against his mouth. He remained where he was for a long time, caressing the side of her face with a gentle hand until he was certain that this time she was truly asleep. Then he managed to free his hand and return to the chair. He wondered if, when she woke, she would remember what had taken place. He needed to discover how her brother had died—only then would he know whether he would be able to keep his word to her. As for Edward Fustian, the world would be a better place without him. He closed his eyes, but it was some time before he fell asleep.

Rosamund woke just as it was getting light and turned over on to her side. Stretching out a hand, she felt for the man she expected to find at her side. Empty! She sat up and the pain in her head thumped in rhythm with the increased beat of her heart. She was terribly thirsty and could not remember getting into bed or aught of their conversation last evening. Where was Master Nilsson? Had he carried her to bed because she was drunk and, disgusted with her behaviour, left her to sleep alone? For this to happen now utterly depressed her spirits.

Her eyes pierced the dimness of the bedchamber and she was able to make out a figure in a chair. Now she became aware of his steady breathing and she slid soundlessly off the bed. She felt dizzy and her throat was tight with misery. This time there really was a need for a parting of the ways. For him to choose a chair rather than remain in the bed spoke much of how he must feel towards her.

She searched for her outer garments and boots and, by some miracle, found them without waking him. She did not pause to put them on, but cautiously went over to the door and unlocked it. She opened it a fraction, managed to ease herself through the gap and closed the door behind her. She would travel the rest of the way to London on foot; if God forgave her and answered her prayer, then she would find her godmother's house before dark. If she and Master Nilsson were ever to meet again, she prayed that he would not recognise his erstwhile travelling companion in Mistress Rosamund Appleby.

Alex woke suddenly and wondered what it was that had disturbed him. It was morning and his gaze darted to the bed. He saw that the bedclothes had been flung back and the bed was empty. He found the door unlocked and hurried downstairs, hoping to find Mistress Appleby taking the fresh air to clear her head. There was no sign of her and he hurried to the stables. His horse was still there, but she was nowhere to be found. Why had she deserted him now? Had she not been fully asleep when he had kissed her? He could think of no other reason why she had taken fright and cursed himself for giving in to temptation. He saddled up his horse and knew he had to find her before she ended up in trouble.

Rosamund thanked the carter who had been kind enough to give her a lift on the last stage of her journey and limped along Aldersgate Street. She glanced up at the threatening sky and knew she had to find her godmother's house before nightfall. But

first she needed a gown to wear. Perhaps she could exchange her cloak for a used gown. Surely there would be a used clothes dealer somewhere in London? But where exactly? She passed St Paul's Cathedral and Paternoster Row where shops sold rosaries in their hundreds. She paused to gaze inside a workshop and marvelled to see books being produced on a printing press. She felt certain Master Nilsson would have been interested to see the printers at work because it had become obvious to her that he was an educated man. But she must not think of him, she had to hurry.

A short while later she had still not found a used clothes dealer. She glanced up at the darkening sky and felt the cold sting of a snowflake touch her cheek; then a positive flurry of snowflakes threatened to blind her. She hurried, but soon realised that she was lost. Suddenly she heard a slithering sound and heavy breathing, then came a suppressed cough. 'Is there someone there?' she called. 'Can you help me?'

A figure loomed out of a doorway a few yards ahead. 'Depends on whether yer can make it worth me while,' said the man.

'What do you mean?' she asked with a tremor in her voice.

'What do yer think I mean?' he sneered.

A hand shot out and seized her arm. Her heart gave a frightening lurch and she managed to tear herself from his grasp. She made to run, but he caught hold of her cloak and dragged her back against him. Her hat went flying as he pinned her arms to her sides.

‘What is it you want?’ she cried.

‘Coin to buy bread and a pallet for the night,’ he replied.

‘I have none. I’m just a poor lad who’s come from the country to try to earn a crust.’

‘Then I’ll have to take yer cloak,’ said that voice in her ear. His foul breath caused her to gag. ‘And don’t try any funny business or I’ll choke the life out of yer.’

With shaking hands Rosamund attempted to unfasten the ties at her throat. But he grew impatient and dragged the garment from her, causing the ties to snap, before running off with it. Furious with herself for behaving like a frightened hen, she gave chase. After all, it was possible that he would lead her out of this maze of alleys. Instead, she ended up blundering into a wall. Her hands explored its surface and she discovered that it loomed high above her and carried on horizontally for what seemed an age.

Surely it must lead somewhere?

Rosamund jogged beside it, tripping over rubbish several times in the gathering gloom. At last she came to a gateway and was about to try to open the door when she heard footsteps on the other side. The door opened and a religious appeared. She gazed at Rosamund from beneath her wimple and suddenly her eyes widened.

‘By the saints, Harry, where have you been these past six months?’ she asked in a charmingly accented voice. ‘Why did you have to go off the way you did? There was really no need. You won’t know it, but Alex left London. Although perhaps you met

with him on your travels?’ she asked anxiously.

‘I think you are mistaking me for someone else,’ said Rosamund.

The nun looked uncertain and peered into Rosamund’s damp face. ‘Aye, I see now that you are not Black Harry, but you are very like him.’ She placed a hand on Rosamund’s chest and smiled straight into her eyes. ‘Is it possible that you are kin to him?’

‘I don’t know a Black Harry. I had a brother once called Harry, but he drowned.’

The nun’s expression altered. ‘You must come with me. I know someone who would be interested to meet you.’

Rosamund felt a prickly feeling in the nape of her neck and suddenly knew this religious was perhaps not what she seemed. At that moment there was the sound of a man’s voice in the yard behind her. Instantly, Rosamund recognised her stepbrother’s voice. She shoved the nun against the door and then she ran like the wind along the passageway.

To her relief there came a turning and the next moment she arrived at a tributary of the Thames. She paused to catch her breath, but she knew she could not delay. She might be completely mistaken about the nun, but she definitely was not about that voice. Lowering her head against the swirling snowflakes, Rosamund began to walk uphill. So it was she did not notice the tall, dark figure coming towards her and blundered into him. Caught off balance, he swayed. She clutched his cloak,

but he slipped in the snow and they both fell to the ground with her on top of him. He arched his body in an attempt to throw her off, but she was entangled in his cloak so that proved impossible. He reached up and pushed. Rosamund gasped, thinking that he must not have realised where he had put his hands and dragged on one of his arms. 'Master, will you desist and release me!' she cried in a panic.

On hearing that muffled voice coming from somewhere beneath his cloak, Alex could scarcely believe his luck. 'Master Appleby! Or should I say *Mistress Appleby*?' he said in a velvety tone.

Rosamund collapsed on top of him and lay unmoving, listening to the heavy thud-thud-thud of his heart and the gallop of her own. He knew her secret, but she deemed him the lesser of two evils. 'Master Nilsson,' she gasped. 'I lost myself in the back alleys and was robbed of my cloak and then I saw a religious, who thought I was someone called Black Harry. I find that very strange in the light of my having had a brother called Harry. Then whose voice did I hear beyond the wall but that of my stepbrother, Edward.'

'You mean Fustian was inside the Steel Yard?'

'Keep your voice down! So that's what that place is,' she murmured. 'I have heard of the headquarters of the Hanseatic League, but never set foot inside. What was Edward doing there? I knew I had to escape. If he catches me now, then it will be your fault. You're lying on part of your cloak and I can't tug it free.'

‘Will you be quiet! Now, if you will release your hold on my cloak we can free ourselves.’

Relieved, she tried to do as he asked, but one of her hands was caught beneath his body and it required effort to free it. He hissed at her to stop.

‘But you’re lying on my hand,’ she explained in an undertone.

He muttered indistinctly, lifting himself up and glancing about him as he did so. He tried not to think about what was going on in his loins. Mistress Appleby might have stopped wriggling, but the damage was already done and he could only hope she was unaware of his arousal. What was it about this woman that she could stir up a whole host of conflicting emotions inside him at such a dangerous time? If Fustian came upon them now, then they would be at a huge disadvantage.

‘That’s better,’ gasped Rosamund, stretched her cramped fingers. She felt a bump against her belly and shifted to avoid it.

Alex groaned and, making an enormous effort, raised himself higher, taking him with her. With a final thrust he managed to throw her aside.

Rosamund scrambled to her feet and took several deep breaths. Despite the cold and damp, she had felt a heat between them that had her wanting to fan herself. But now was not the time to think of such things. They had to get away. She had only taken a couple of steps when a noise to her rear warned her that they were not alone. She called a warning to Alex before she was seized from behind.

‘Let me go,’ she cried, fearing that she had been caught by Edward.

‘Youse shut yer mouth and keep yer orders to yerself,’ snapped an unfamiliar voice.

Rosamund could scarcely believe that she had been captured by another ruffian. ‘Not now,’ she muttered, struggling to free herself.

‘We wants to know what yer’ve got in yer pockets,’ snarled the man, twisting her right arm up her back. She cried out in pain.

‘Hold fast there,’ said Alex, drawing not only his own sword, but Rosamund’s short-sword as well. ‘Release her at once.’

‘Another furriner giving his orders,’ said a woman with a sniff.

‘Just do as I say or I’ll run you through,’ said Alex.

The man who held Rosamund captive produced a dagger. ‘Come one step nearer and I’ll slit his throat.’

‘You have too much to say for yourself,’ growled Alex, and with one swift movement he knocked the dagger from the man’s hand and then, with a twirl of the other sword, he caught him a blow beneath the chin with its hilt. The dagger flew off into the darkness and the man’s hold on Rosamund’s arm slackened as he slid to the ground.

‘Hey, what have yer dun to him?’ asked his accomplice.

Alex did not bother replying, but seized Rosamund’s hand and dragged her away, hurrying her along the bank of the tributary until the woman’s cries faded into the distance.

‘Wh-where are we going?’ asked Rosamund, needing to

clench her teeth in an attempt to stop them from chattering. She could not see the way ahead.

Alex bit back an oath and removed his own cloak and wrapped it round her. His fingers brushed her throat as he tied the strings and she trembled.

‘Keep still and be glad you’re a woman,’ he said brusquely. ‘I wouldn’t be so gallant if you were a man.’

‘Why should y-you feel a n-need to be gallant when y-you must believe my behaviour w-w-wicked and unseemly?’

‘I was taught by my grandmother to respect women. A habit I find difficult to break. Come, we must go carefully. I have friends who can provide us with a hot tub and dry clothing.’

‘Where is your horse?’ she asked.

‘At their house. I stabled him whilst I visited a couple of places.’

‘But I told you I had to see Lady Elizabeth Stanley. Did you not think of going to her home in search of me?’

‘Aye. But not immediately. Anyway, we are some way from her mansion.’

‘I was looking for a used clothes dealer in the hope of exchanging my cloak for a gown.’

‘Then you are in luck,’ said Alex, stepping carefully. ‘Tell me, how did you reach London so swiftly on foot?’

‘A man took pity on me and let me ride in his cart. I was limping because my feet were sore.’ Suddenly she slipped in the snow and was saved only by the strength in his wrist.

‘You should not have run away from me.’ His tone was vexed.

‘I had to because I believed you had a disgust of me for getting drunk.’ She gripped his hand tightly, still concerned about slipping in the snow. ‘Tell me, how did I betray myself?’

‘Your eyes, your lips and the way you swing your hips when you walk—the timbre of your voice and not even a hint of a whisker on your chin. Of course, there was also the slip about your stepmother wanting you to marry Edward.’

‘How foolish of me!’ She sighed heavily. ‘But why did you not mention it at the time? I see I made lots of mistakes, but I swear on my mother’s grave that everything I told you about myself and my stepfamily is true.’

‘If I did not believe that, then I would not be taking you to my friends. How old are you, Mistress Appleby?’

‘I have seen twenty-two summers, not eighteen,’ she said rapidly. ‘Do you not think it strange that that religious mistook me for this Black Harry?’

‘How did your brother die?’

‘Lady Monica told me he drowned. His clothes were found close to a part of the river where he used to bathe.’

‘Was his body ever found?’

‘No, but she initiated a search.’

‘It is still possible that he did not drown,’ said Alex. ‘I must tell you, Mistress Appleby, that you were crying in your sleep last night. You believed he was being carried away.’

Rosamund stopped in her tracks. ‘You mean my dream of him

being carried away was not a delusion, but real?' she asked in a strained voice.

'Aye. It can be the only answer to your not only being mistaken for this Black Harry, but also for your father seeing a likeness to someone in a past life in this same Black Harry.'

Rosamund's mouth fell open and then she clamped it shut and took a deep breath before saying in a rush, 'How do you know this about my father?'

'Because he spoke those words to me on the only occasion I met him.'

Rosamund experienced such a splurge of joy that it rocked her to her heels and she needed to clutch Alex all the tighter. 'I so want to believe it,' she said.

'Then you must because I deem it the truth.'

Tears welled in Rosamund's eyes. 'I remember my brother well. I loved him dearly,' she said softly. 'He was protective towards me and was brave and funny.'

'Do not expect him to be exactly the same as you remember,' warned Alex. 'That's if we ever find him. People change.'

'Not Harry,' she said firmly.

'How can you possibly know? I trusted him like you did. When I first knew him I believed he possessed all the qualities you mentioned. But he betrayed me for the love of Ingrid and a stolen cargo.'

'I don't believe my brother is a thief and you are saying that love changes people for the worst? I do not believe that either,'

she said stoutly.

‘I deem you have never been in love, Mistress Appleby,’ he rasped. ‘Passion, desire, lust can drive a man to do things that he would never normally do.’

‘More fool the man,’ she retorted. ‘Oh, how I wish Father was here! This news would have made him so happy.’

Alex looked at her in astonishment. ‘Your father treated you disgracefully. And he did not even say that that likeness was to his own son, but just someone in a past life.’

Some of her joy evaporated and Rosamund said, ‘You would not know how badly my mother’s death affected my father and then on top of those tidings came the news that Harry had drowned. I believe my stepmother—not that she was my stepmother then—told him that the grief had driven me mad. And it is true that I was bereft.’

‘All the more reason for him to show you love instead of allowing that woman and her sons to try to sap your spirit utterly,’ he said roundly. ‘I am just amazed that they did not succeed.’

Rosamund was silent, touched by his championing her in such a way.

Alex smiled. ‘I can see I have taken your breath away. Time to move on, I deem.’

To her further amazement, he swung her up into his arms. ‘What are you doing?’ she asked. ‘You must let me down.’

‘Be quiet, woman! You have caused me enough trouble already. Now relax and let me make haste.’

Rosamund said no more. She might be shivery and exhausted, happy and sad and utterly astounded by the fact that Harry was alive, not to mention being vexed with Master Nilsson for doubting Harry's loyalty, but at least he seemed willing to still help her.

‘These friends of yours...?’ she asked.

‘As I said earlier, Mistress Appleby, you are in luck. They make a living from buying and selling used garments. My friend, Walther, is Swedish and married to Maud, who is a Londoner, born and bred. They have been of great help to me and I know that I can always count on finding a bed at their house when I stay in the city.’

‘Will they have a separate bedchamber for me?’ asked Rosamund.

His arms tightened about her. ‘You worry needlessly, mistress. I will explain just enough to satisfy them why you are dressed as you are. Now, do you feel strong enough to stand?’ he asked.

Despite still feeling shaky, Rosamund said, ‘Of course. How can you ask after my surviving the journey we made together?’

He felt truly rebuked and set her down. After producing the key, he opened one of the doors and ushered her into a large yard. ‘Beware of the washing lines.’

He stretched out a hand to her and she took it thankfully. He steered her between the lines towards a building at the far end of the yard, where light gleamed through the shutters. He knocked on a door and called out in the Swedish tongue. There came an

excited voice and then bolts were drawn back. The door opened to reveal a man holding a lantern who addressed Alex in his own language. They spoke for several moments before Alex turned to Rosamund.

‘This is my friend Walther. He welcomes you to his home.’

Rosamund thanked him in English and was relieved that he made no sign of disapproval of the way she was dressed. Even so she felt awkward and warm with embarrassment. Her awkwardness deepened when an older woman entered the room, but her primary attention was not for her, but Master Nilsson. Rosamund watched the woman smile at the sight of him.

‘So, you have come back for your horse.’

‘Aye, but I wish to ask more of you than stabling my horse.’

‘Of course, anything you want.’ She frowned suddenly. ‘But you are soaking wet and...’ She peered over his shoulder and whispered, ‘Who is this you have brought us? One of your spies in need of a new disguise?’

Alex nodded. ‘But do not speak of the work to her. Mistress Appleby is chilled to the bone and in need of a hot tub—as am I. You must also find for her several of your best gowns and the necessary accessories—we are to visit the Lady Elizabeth Stanley on the morrow. Can you provide us with bedchambers for this night? You will not lose by it.’

Maud nodded. ‘Walther told me earlier that you have asked him to hire some men to keep a watch on Master William Fustian’s house. We do not like the man. He would put us out of

business if he could.'

Alex nodded. 'He has no liking for foreigners, which is strange when he has to do business with them. Anyway, he is unaware that Mistress Appleby is in my company so he will not come here.'

She nodded. 'I will go now and speak to the maids and have them fill tubs for you both.'

Alex rejoined Rosamund. 'I have explained your needs to Maud, Mistress Appleby, and she is having a hot tub made ready for you.'

'You did not tell her everything?' asked Rosamund, mortified at the thought of the older woman knowing she had spent nights, never mind days, alone with this man.

'Of course not. She believes you are a spy in disguise and in need of a few changes of costume.'

Rosamund gasped and put a hand to her mouth and said in a muffled voice, 'You jest!'

He grinned.

Rosamund felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see Maud smiling at her. 'It is a pleasure to have you here with us, Mistress Appleby. I have ordered a maid to fill a tub for you, but first you will follow me to the parlour.'

Her friendly manner made Rosamund feel at ease. 'I appreciate your kindness in coming to my aid.'

'It is always a pleasure to help one's friends. You will take a cup of mead? No doubt you are hungry, too. I've smoked eel and

bread.'

Rosamund's face lit up. 'You are generous. I have not eaten all day.'

'Then follow me. You can warm yourself by the fire and I will have a maid bring food and mead whilst I see what I can find for you in the way of gowns for your latest assignment.'

Chapter Six

Rosamund nodded dumbly, glanced at Master Nilsson to see if he was coming as well, but he was in conversation with Walther. She followed Maud through an unlit chamber and into another room. There a fire glowed on the hearth and several candles provided extra light. She was shown to a cushioned settle and then left alone. She removed her wet gloves and placed them on the hearth to dry. Master Nilsson must be playing games with her. She was no spy!

A maid entered the room, carrying a tray upon which there was a platter of food and a drinking vessel. She slanted a curious glance at Rosamund as she set food and drink on the table and, then, with a whisk of skirts, she was gone.

By the time Rosamund had consumed the food and drunk the mead Maud had returned to the parlour. She bid Rosamund follow her and took her to a room containing a steaming wooden tub.

‘This is where we wash the clothes that we buy. Some we just hang in the steam and clean any stains because washing would ruin the fabric,’ she explained. ‘You’ll find all you need on the chair. I’ll return in a short while.’

As soon as Rosamund was alone she stripped off her travel-stained garments. Then she tested the water with her elbow before lowering herself into its depths. For a moment she just

sat there with her legs hunched up against her body, relishing the heat. Then she reached for the soap and gave herself a thorough cleansing, including her hair. As she did so, her thoughts were of Master Nilsson and how he had wrapped his cloak round her and lifted her off her feet. A picture suddenly flashed into her mind of a figure bending over her, crooning '*Little Rosie is crazy!*' A cold shiver ran down her spine and she was remembering someone holding her down whilst her stepmother forced her mouth open and spooned in the liquid. She could hear Edward asking his mother what effect the potion would have on Rosamund's mind. Loathing filled her and she so longed for them both to suffer for all they had put her family through that she vowed she would not rest until it came about. And she was convinced that Harry would feel the same.

She did not linger in the tub for long; by the time she had wrapped a drying cloth around her and was rubbing her hair dry, Maud returned with a woollen dressing robe. 'Goodness! How different you look already,' she said, holding out the robe to her guest.

Rosamund smiled shyly and slipped her hands through the sleeves and fastened the belt about her slender waist. Then she followed Maud from the room and up a flight of stairs.

'You will sleep here, Mistress Appleby,' said Maud, stopping outside a door.

Rosamund followed her inside, only to stop short when she saw Master Nilsson standing there. Alex's gaze washed over her

and paused a fraction as his eyes rested on her cleavage. She had made a handsome young man, but she was even lovelier as a woman.

‘I beg your pardon for invading your privacy. I saw a light in here and was curious. I stayed to approve Maud’s choice of gowns,’ he said.

With his eyes upon her in a way that made her aware of her femininity, Rosamund drew the opening of her robe closer together. She looked down at the garments spread out on the bed and her dark brows knit. ‘I do not have any money to pay for them,’ she said.

‘I will do so,’ said Alex firmly.

Rosamund shook her head. ‘I know you paid for my food and lodgings on the journey, but that was different. I cannot allow you to do this for me.’

‘Why?’ He seemed amused. ‘Perhaps you have me written off as a pauper.’

She hesitated. ‘You cannot be rich if you need to wander hither and thither far from your own country, taking *spying* work where you can find it and performing in front of whoever will pay you. I know you have spoken of your grandfather’s business, but—’

‘You still know little about my life,’ said Alex in a mild tone. ‘But if it bothers you, I will simply loan you the money. You need to make a good impression on her ladyship if you wish to obtain her support in delving into the circumstances surrounding your father’s death. These gowns will not cost a fortune, but should be

suitable for that purpose.'

Rosamund moved over to the bed and fingered one of the gowns. Alex gazed over her shoulder and said, 'That is an excellent colour and will match your eyes.'

Rosamund felt her cheeks warm and was glad he could not see her face. 'Aye. It is the kind of dark blue I like,' she said casually.

She turned to speak to Maud about the blue gown, but realised she must have slipped out of the bedchamber whilst she and Master Nilsson were talking. 'Where has Maud gone? Now we are here in your friends' house, we must have a care for our reputations.'

He said seriously, 'You are right to be concerned about such matters, but Maud and Walther would not expect me to behave in any other way than honourably to a woman.'

'Tell me, when did you first realise I was a woman?' she asked curiously.

Alex leant against a bedpost where he could watch her expression. 'I suspected you were not all you seemed that first night back in the cave.'

She was taken aback. 'So soon!'

'Aye. But there is no need to feel that you must marry me. It is our secret that we spent several nights together.' The words were out before he could recall them and he wondered why he had mentioned marriage. It had not been in his thoughts at all.

Rosamund had not even considered the need for him to make a respectable woman of her, but she did now. The bedchamber

appeared to tilt and then spin round so that she had need to clutch one of the other bedposts.

‘I do not wish to be married right now. I have to find Harry and make my stepmother suffer by bringing Edward to his knees.’

Alex felt a vague disappointment that she had no desire to marry him. ‘I am glad that you are a woman of good sense,’ he said brusquely. ‘Marriage would be a complication in my life that I can well do without.’

‘Then that is settled and we will not refer to it again,’ said Rosamund, pushing aside the garments on the bed and sitting down. ‘It is not that I do not enjoy your company,’ she added, toying with her fingernails. ‘But naught happened between us that either of us needs to feel guilty about.’ Her cheeks burned as she remembered how she had wanted him to kiss her and hold her. ‘I am still chaste,’ she added, a quiver in her voice, ‘so let us move on to talk of other matters.’

Alex went to a dressing table upon which were items for a woman’s *toilette*. He picked up a comb and ran a fingernail along its teeth. ‘As you are such a woman of good sense, I will broach a matter that is on my mind. Have you considered the likelihood of Lady Elizabeth refusing to help you and your stepbrother seeking you out and forcing you to go with him?’

Rosamund said, ‘I do not believe that she will refuse me. I have not been completely honest with you concerning Lady Elizabeth. I kept from you that she is my godmother.’

Alex dropped the comb and whirled round to face her. ‘Your

godmother! Why did you keep this a secret from me?' he demanded.

'Because you would have questioned why the person I was pretending to be had a lady for a godmother,' said Rosamund. 'I am certain there is that in your life that you have not told me—and why should you when we scarcely know each other? Besides, I have not seen my godmother since before my mother died. Yet I have this hope that she will welcome me like a daughter. Then when Harry comes home I could keep house for him.' She paused. 'Which reminds me of something that religious said when she thought I was Harry.'

Alex fixed her with a stare. 'What did she say?'

Rosamund concentrated. 'Something like "*Why did you have to go off the way you did? There was really no need. You won't know it, but Alex left London. Although perhaps you met with him on your travels?*"'

Alex swore beneath his breath in his own tongue.

'Obviously it means something to you,' said Rosamund.

He nodded. 'It was Ingrid you spoke to.'

'Ingrid! But isn't she the woman who—?'

'Aye. And it seems I have misjudged her.'

'And my brother? How upsetting! She must have taken the veil because you both broke her heart.' She could not prevent a touch of sarcasm invading her voice.

'I do not think so,' said Alex drily. 'A nun's habit was one of her favourite disguises.'

Rosamund could not believe what she was hearing. ‘You’re not saying that Ingrid is a spy, too?’

‘I really should not be discussing such information with you,’ said Alex, feeling he needed to be alone for a while. He made for the door. ‘I must go and bathe,’ he said abruptly.

‘No! Don’t go just yet,’ said Rosamund, holding out a hand to him. ‘I would like to know how you met my brother.’

Alex flicked back a lock of damp, tawny hair and his expression was moody. ‘All right. I will do so.’

Rosamund’s heart was suddenly beating ten to the dozen.

‘It was in the port of Visby in my own country twelve years ago. I found him hiding amongst some merchandise that had been carted to the port, ready to be shipped overseas for my grandfather,’ said Alex. ‘Harry looked half-starved and was covered in sores—his clothes were just rags. It was obvious that he needed help.’

‘Poor Harry! Why was he in such a state?’ she asked in distress.

‘At that time we did not speak the other’s language, but my grandfather knew enough English to discover that Harry had escaped from a pirate ship. I might have told you a little about pirate ships already. Anyway, one can encounter many a pirate ship in the northern seas—not that their captains would appreciate being called by that name. But you will find Scottish ships raiding English merchant vessels and English ones attacking their Scottish neighbours. It is not unknown for both to mistakenly attack vessels from my own country, as well as

others from the Baltic.' He paused and held her gaze. 'It must be stopped, for it is disastrous for trade. That is why England and Scotland are signing a Pact of Perpetual Peace and Henry is marrying off his elder daughter to James of Scotland.' He frowned. 'But you will want to know what happened next to Harry.'

'Please.'

'We took Harry home with us and my grandmother fed him. That summer we spent getting to know each other. I taught Harry Swedish and he taught me English. We fished and sailed around the islands and were given work to do by my grandparents. Eventually Harry asked my grandfather if he could find him a position on one of his ships. This he did to their mutual satisfaction. Harry and I saw less of each other after that, but the friendship that was forged that summer remained and, when possible, we met up at various ports throughout Europe.' His voice trailed off and his expression was bleak. 'I've said enough. I will leave you. Sleep well.' He made for the door.

'No! Wait!' She hurried after him and seized his arm. 'You cannot leave the story there. Tell me—where does Ingrid come in all this? Where did you both meet her?'

Alex allowed himself to be persuaded to sit down again. 'I met her in Stockholm at a masque. She was young, lovely, charming and I believed her to be a lady.' He fell silent.

'And was she a lady?' prodded Rosamund, wondering what he had been doing at this masque. Spying?

A painful smile played about his mouth. 'That's what she believes, but I doubt it is true. The next time we met I was with Harry and we were unloading a cargo in Visby. She looked just as lovely, but was not so well dressed. She gazed right through me as if she did not recognise me, but she spoke to Harry, asking him about the cargo.' He frowned. 'I could see that he was just as bewitched by her as I was that night in Stockholm. The next time we met was in Bruges and then London. It was then I began to have my suspicions about her.'

'What suspicions? She certainly travels a lot,' said Rosamund, almost enviously.

'That is because sometimes she has to leave a country swiftly. She is not a real lady, but lives by her wits and has a definite gift for disguise and getting men to talk.' He rose and said firmly, 'I believe I've given you enough to mull over.'

'Aye. But I would hear more,' said Rosamund, wondering how much secret information Ingrid had managed to get out of him. 'You will tell me more tomorrow?'

He did not answer, and this time, there was no keeping him.

Rosamund returned to the bed and perched on it. She had no doubt that Master Nilsson had saved her brother's life that day in Visby. For that she would be eternally grateful. She longed to see Harry and get some answers from him about this woman, Ingrid. It seemed to her that Ingrid had truly woven a spell over both men. But for what purpose? And did she know Edward? After all, hadn't she heard his voice at the Steel Yard? Surely he

was the person who Ingrid implied would like to meet her? And where was Harry if Ingrid did not know of his whereabouts?

Rosamund prayed that he was still alive. It would have been far better for her never to have known that Harry had not drowned all those years ago than to discover now, after having such hopes of being reunited with him, that he was dead after all. She felt a lump in her throat and tears pricked the back of her eyes. She needed to talk to Master Nilsson about this matter, but no doubt he was thinking of Ingrid. Perhaps he was full of hope that they could be lovers again, now he believed her innocent of betraying him with Harry.

If only Rosamund had know it was she that was much on Alex's mind, then she might have felt much more cheerful. As he immersed himself in hot water and rested a leg on the rim of the wooden tub, he had been shocked to realise that he no longer wanted Ingrid. He had spent too many months thinking of her with Harry and feeling hurt. Of course, there were questions he needed to ask her, but somehow during the last week or more he had become accustomed to Mistress Appleby's company. He thought how enjoyable it would be sharing a large tub with her. But there was no way that he could have Harry's sister as his mistress. A pity, but there it was. He had promised to find Harry for her and he meant to keep his promise. There was still the matter of the message he had been sent and only Harry could explain that away.

Alex soaped an aching thigh muscle and imagined Mistress

Appleby performing the task. He realised that he was obsessing over her now it was in the open that he knew her for a woman. They were going to have to be careful what they said when they reached Lady Elizabeth's mansion. If she was to suspect that they had spent nights together, unchaperoned, she would think the worst. They had to dissuade her from such thoughts. He found himself considering telling her ladyship that he had enlisted Mistress Appleby as one of his spies. She would be useful at court with her gift of self-effacement, whilst keeping her eyes and ears open. He could guess what she would make of that notion. In his mind's eye he could see her pretty mouth falling open and those blue-violet eyes of hers widening in astonishment. 'You jest, Master Nilsson,' she would blurt out.

He grinned, imagining himself silencing her protestations by kissing those luscious lips. He recalled the feel of her satiny skin beneath his fingers and the swell of her breasts against his chest as they lay in the snow. A definite stirring in his loins caused him to cut short such imaginings and reach for the cold-water jug.

That night when Alex fell asleep he dreamed that he and Mistress Appleby were making love. Afterwards he decked her out in silks and satins and velvet and the best amber jewellery from his country. He woke up with the words running in his head: *I give you a choice. You either marry me or be my lover spy.* It was then he realised just how desperate he was not to be parted from her and had to remind himself that he had once felt the same about Ingrid and that he no longer loved her.

Rosamund had also been dreaming, but hers were dark ones of her brother drowning and crying out to her to rescue him. She woke with tears on her cheeks and got out of bed and down on her knees and prayed that he was still alive and she would see him again.

She felt better after that and fell asleep once more. This time in her dream she was wearing a dark blue gown and on her raven hair she wore a silver circlet encrusted with gemstones of amber. Master Nilsson was facing her as he placed a ring on her finger. Strangely he was wearing a saffron-dyed tunic and a soft leather jerkin, but on his flaxen head he also wore a silver circlet. He was smiling tenderly down at her and then suddenly he vanished and in his place was her stepbrother's snarling face.

She woke in terror and this time she did not go back to sleep. She wondered what the dream could mean. No doubt her stepmother would have said it was a sign of her madness. On shaky legs, she went over to the window and drew back the curtain and peered outside. Daylight had come and the sun glistened on the snow in the yard. Her heart lifted and she told herself that she would believe that Harry was still alive. As she gazed down into the yard she saw Master Nilsson tending his horse.

The sight of him reassured her, but she could not help wondering if he had made time to go and take a look at her stepbrother's residence. What had Edward and Ingrid been doing inside the Steel Yard? She must ask Master Nilsson what it was

like on the other side of those high walls.

She moved away from the window and looked at the garments that she had placed on a chair before getting into bed, without having made the effort to try any of them on. She removed the robe that she had slept in and hastened to cover her nakedness with a cream, woollen under gown. The feel of the soft, warm fabric gave her a *frisson* of pleasure. She pulled on the blue gown over it and the sensation when the skirts brushed her calves as she twirled round made her want to dance. The sleeves were puffed about her upper arms, but gathered tightly in a band just below the elbow, where they puffed out again to be gathered in embroidered bands at the wrists. She stretched forth her arms and did another twirl.

Then she frowned. What was she thinking of? She could only have this gown if Master Nilsson loaned her the money and loans had to be paid back. But she was going to have to wear a gown if she were to go with him to Lady Elizabeth's house, so she was going to have to accept being further in debt to him.

Having made that decision, she tried on several more gowns. She dithered over whether to take the dark blue one, but remembered what he had said about the colour matching her eyes. She selected another two gowns, one green and one saffron yellow, before also trying on stockings, garters, a couple of hats, shoes and boots.

She was combing her hair when there came a knock on the door.

‘Mistress Appleby, are you awake? We must make haste.’

Her pulses raced. ‘Aye. I am almost ready, Master Nilsson.’

‘You have chosen some gowns to take with you?’ he asked.

Rosamund hesitated and then opened the door. She caught a whiff of almond-and-honey soap and noticed he was clean shaven. His tawny hair curled about his ears and he had changed his garments and now wore a cream linen shirt beneath a russet doublet; his wellformed legs were clad in red hose. Her senses were roused; she realised that not only did she still want him to kiss her, but that she was desperate for his approval of her appearance.

Alex’s breath caught in his throat at the anxiety in her eyes and he wanted to punch those who had given her such a low opinion of herself. ‘Blue is a colour you should wear often,’ he said, taking one of her hands and twirling her round. ‘How lovely you look.’ He felt some of the tension leave her and her obvious delight made him want to reassure her by taking her in his arms and kissing her. But he knew that he must keep a rein on his passions.

‘You can have no notion of how different I feel wearing such a gown,’ she said shyly.

‘Your eyes are like sapphires. I scarcely recognise you as the same person who rode me down near Appleby Manor,’ he teased.

‘That seems so long ago now,’ said Rosamund, blushing. ‘But you must go downstairs, Master Nilsson. There is no need for you to wait for me. I will be down as soon as I have tidied my hair.’

‘I am content to wait for you.’ He released her hand and went

over to the dressing table and picked up a net of silken blue threads. ‘What a pretty trifle this is. You will wear it?’ Rosamund eyed the hairnet and agreed that it was indeed pretty. He handed it to her. ‘Have you chosen other gowns to take with you?’

‘I have picked another two,’ she answered, ‘that is, if you are willing to fund me to that extent? I need boots and shoes and other fripperies, as well.’

‘Of course I am willing.’ He picked up the cloaks hanging over the back of the chair. ‘You will have these?’

Rosamund gave them a fleeting glance. ‘I need only one.’

Alex placed a fur-lined blue velvet cloak about her shoulders. ‘Now how does that feel?’

Rosamund had noticed the cloak earlier, but had deemed it too costly to try on. Now she could not resist stroking the blue pile. ‘I have never worn velvet before.’

‘You will need a brooch to fasten it as it has no ties,’ said Alex.

‘I do not have a brooch.’ She made to remove the cloak, but he stayed her with a hand.

‘I have a brooch you can use. Please accept this cloak as a gift. I know you do not wish to be beholden to me, but I would like to see you wearing it.’

She would have refused him, only he lifted a fold of the material and brushed it against her cheek. ‘Imagine wearing such a cloak in your stepmother’s presence. Picture her gnashing her teeth in envy and fury.’

A faint smile replaced Rosamund’s serious expression. ‘You

tempt me, Master Nilsson. But I cannot wear it now—it is an evening cloak.’

‘Then wear this brown woollen one for travelling and we will take the blue one with us. Now tidy your hair and let us be on our way.’

Rosamund submitted to his will. When Harry returned, she felt certain he would willingly pay her debts. She pinned up her hair beneath the blue silk net, whilst Alex neatly folded the garments she had chosen.

She followed him downstairs and into the parlour where Maud and Walther were eating breakfast in front of the fire. Walther said something in Swedish to Alex, but it was Maud who translated his words. ‘My husband says how lovely you are and I agree with him. You will have some bread and honey and ale?’

Rosamund thanked her, and was shown to the table. Maud left her for a moment, but she was soon joined by Alex and Walther. Whilst their host poured ale into drinking vessels, Alex produced a silver brooch from a pouch. He handed it to Rosamund and she gazed at it with interest because its design was unusual.

‘What does it symbolise?’ she asked. ‘It looks like Christ’s cross, only...’

‘It was once an amulet of Thor’s hammer,’ said Alex. ‘As you can see, it has been made into a cross in the form of a brooch.’

‘You must value it highly,’ she said.

He hesitated. ‘It belonged to Harry. I bent to pick it up and it was then that I was attacked from behind.’

She paled. ‘You’ve kept this because you believe it is evidence against my brother?’

Alex shrugged. ‘I kept it because I did not wish to be rid of it. You can keep it.’

She was greatly moved by the thought of having in her possession that which had belonged to her brother. ‘Thank you. I will take care of it until I see him again.’

At that moment Maud returned, along with a serving maid, so no more was said about the brooch.

When the meal was over and Rosamund came to look for the bundle of clothes, there was no sign of it. She spoke to Alex about it.

‘Maud has tied it up with cord and it awaits us in the next chamber. We will collect it on our way out.’ He stood and helped her to her feet.

Rosamund thanked Walther and Maud for their hospitality.

‘We hope all goes well with your plans and look forward to seeing you both soon,’ they said.

Chapter Seven

Alex and Rosamund spoke little as they rode through the streets to Lady Elizabeth's mansion, which was situated near the Strand. Two watchmen stood on guard at the gates. Alex dismounted and spoke to them. The gates were thrown wide and a stable boy summoned to tend to the horse. Alex led Rosamund to the entrance of the house and the door was opened to them by the butler. Alex handed him a missive that he had written last night in his bedchamber. He exchanged a few words with him and, after a curious glance in Rosamund's direction, the man showed them into a large hall and told them to wait while he informed Lady Elizabeth of their arrival.

Rosamund's heart was beating fast, but she did her best not to reveal her nervousness to Alex and gazed about the hall. She hoped that her godmother would recognise her. But would Rosamund remember Lady Elizabeth? Suddenly her eyes alighted on a portrait on a far wall and she hurried over to take a closer look at it.

Alex followed her. 'Your godmother when she was young,' he said. 'I recall that I once visited here with my grandfather. It had slipped my mind until I saw the house.'

'Godmother was beautiful! I wonder if she has changed much.'

'She is an old woman,' said Alex in a low voice. 'This was here when I visited as a boy.'

‘Her skin looks as soft as rose petals,’ she murmured.

Alex rubbed his chin with his knuckles. ‘Aye, it is a pretty picture.’

Rosamund darted him a sidelong glance. ‘How did your grandfather come to be invited here?’

‘If I remember rightly, it was due to her having visited Visby a few months previously. She had been widowed the year before and had decided she wished to travel. She commissioned some amber-and-silver jewellery to her own design. Grandfather took on the role of her agent and she asked him to deliver the commission in person. He decided it would be useful for me to visit London and so brought me along.’

‘I had no notion you were so long acquainted,’ said Rosamund.

‘The lady scarcely noticed me.’ Alex paused. ‘We need to decide what to tell Lady Elizabeth. We cannot tell her the whole truth.’

Rosamund went over to the fire and removed her gloves. ‘If we did so, she wouldn’t want to have aught to do with me.’ She held her hands out to the flames. ‘Besides, we don’t know what else she might have been told about me during her sojourn in Lathom House except that I was ill and slightly crazed in the head.’

‘I do not believe you were ever crazy. Anyway, hopefully she will be sympathetic to one in your situation,’ said Alex, joining Rosamund by the fire.

‘I pray so. Do we admit to having met up north?’

‘Have you any other suggestions? I believe it is always best to

stick as close to the truth as one can,' said Alex.

'I had believed my godmother dead until the day I met you,' said Rosamund. 'I think Father had mentioned that she was very ill some years ago. I believe he expected her to die.' She sat down and smoothed out the kid gloves on her knee.

Alex's gaze rested on Rosamund's bent head. 'I presume your plan that day was to tell your godmother of how you were being treated at home and of your suspicion concerning the death of your father?'

'Aye.' Rosamund sighed. 'When you told me that she had already departed for London, it placed me in somewhat of a dilemma, as you well know.'

'But if you were pretending to be Master Wood, how did you plan to gain entry to Lathom House and speak to Lady Elizabeth?'

She shrugged. 'Does that matter now? I am more concerned about what I am to say to her when I see her.'

He nodded. 'We will tell her that we met outside Lathom where you discovered that she had already left for London. I told you that I was acquainted with her ladyship and intended visiting her. You decided to travel to London, so I offered you my escort as we were travelling in the same direction.'

Rosamund shook her head. 'It will not do. She will suspect that we travelled alone.'

'Not if we can tell her that we had company on the road,' said Alex firmly. 'She is not to know otherwise.'

Rosamund plucked at her skirts. 'It sounds feasible, but you have not said what your reason was for calling at Lathom House?'

Before Alex could answer, there was a sound behind them. They both turned to see a woman standing there. She was dressed in a plum-coloured gown and her red frizzy hair resembled a bird's nest.

'I cannot believe that at last we are to meet, Rosamund,' she gasped with a hand to her chest.

Rosamund realised that this lady must be her godmother and could only hope she had not overheard their conversation. She rose to her feet and went to meet her. The lady seemed to glide across the floor towards her as if on wheels. Close up, Rosamund realised that the lady's face was painted white that gave her features a mask-like appearance. 'Lady Elizabeth?'

'Who else, my dear?' said the lady drily. 'I know I have altered somewhat, but it is still me beneath this paint.'

A flushed Rosamund apologised. 'I am delighted to see you again after all these years, Godmother.' She dipped a curtsy and then took the hand offered to help her rise.

'My appearance always gives people a shock, whether it be for the first time or after an age,' said Lady Elizabeth.

'You are very understanding and I thank you for your welcome. I would have visited you at Lathom House if I'd been able to do so. But it was not easy escaping my stepmother's domination. By the time I did so, you had already left for London,' said Rosamund.

‘That woman!’ snorted Lady Elizabeth, rolling her eyes expressively. ‘I am still angry that your father put her in my dear Jane’s place.’ She looked at Alex and her eyes softened. ‘Thank you for your missive, my dear Baron. You are so like your grandfather. If you will be so kind as to be patient whilst I talk with my goddaughter, I will give you my full attention in a moment.’

My dear Baron, thought Rosamund, puzzled by the title. She watched him remove his hat and incline his tawny head. ‘Of course, Lady Elizabeth. I understand what a pleasure it must be for you both to meet again after all these years.’

‘Charming,’ she said, touching his cheek with a finger before resuming her conversation with her goddaughter. ‘So that woman asserted her will over you.’

Rosamund pulled herself together. ‘You sound as if you know the kind of woman my stepmother is,’ she said.

Her godmother’s eyes widened. ‘My dear, your mother and I knew Monica McDonald when we were children. We all had kin living in the north.’ Lady Elizabeth sat down and waved them to a settle. ‘Jane refused to believe the rumours about Monica’s wanton behaviour because she always believed the best of people. Anyway, Monica stayed on at Appleby Manor after Jane miscarried, supposedly to nurse her.’ She sighed. ‘Well, we know what happened after that! Monica’s family was such a quarrelsome one and they were furious when she had an affair with her cousin’s husband. No doubt it was that which made it

impossible for her to return home.’ She frowned. ‘The whole lot of them were unstable and I knew Monica McDonald for what she was—a greedy, conniving madam.’ She paused. ‘I have heard that her lover is a widower now, so who is to say that she might not run off with him.’ Lady Elizabeth grimaced and cracks appeared in the white paint and there was a peculiar smell.

Rosamund swallowed a cough and then hurried into speech. ‘Thank you for telling me this story. My stepmother’s background was always a mystery to me, for she seldom spoke of her family. Yet surely Father must have known something of my stepmother’s past, so why did he marry her?’

‘No doubt she tricked him into it. He was griefstricken and lonely and most likely found it convenient to have a new *mother* for you close at hand.’

‘She was no mother to me,’ said Rosamund, her eyes smouldering. ‘She told people I was mad and was going to have me locked up. She feared what I might tell them and that was why I had to escape.’

‘I am sure she has plenty to hide and was, no doubt, jealous of you, my dear,’ wheezed Lady Elizabeth. ‘You have grown into a lovely woman, so like my dear Jane. I look a fright and know it. But when you reach my age, having survived the smallpox, then one must be forgiven for painting over wrinkles and pockmarks.’

Rosamund felt both pity and admiration for her. ‘Father told me years ago that you were ill and expected to die. It was not until I heard my stepmother mention you that I realised you were

still alive. I knew then that I had to see you.’

‘Well, I am glad you made the effort, my dear. My intention in trying to get in touch with you was so we could become better acquainted before it is too late.’ She patted Rosamund’s hand and then turned to Alex. ‘My dear Baron, I was so sorry to hear of the deaths of your grandparents. Your grandfather in particular was helpful to me on several occasions. I am delighted that we are to work together and you are to be part of my troupe. I do hope you will like the costumes for the dance. They are black-and-silver and there will be such carolling that it will surely gladden the hearts of the royal family and their Scottish guests.’

Rosamund wondered what they were talking about, but there was no mistake about him being a baron because her godmother had addressed him by that title again. Of course, it might be all of an act if he really was a spy. Whichever was the truth, it was obvious to her that here was an example of Master Nilsson’s duplicity. He had not been honest with her.

‘I presume there will be time for rehearsals?’ he was asking.

‘The members of my troupe will be here this afternoon,’ informed Lady Elizabeth. ‘If you are to take part, then I will partner you. But time enough to sort that out later and for you to learn...’ she paused to catch her breath and patted her bosom ‘...your steps...and see what gossip you can rake through for information. We will leave for Richmond in the morning—’ She broke off again, her chest heaving.

Rosamund gazed at her anxiously. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I am as well as can be expected in the circumstances’ she gasped. ‘I have decided that the troupe will wear masks to create an air of mystery. What is your opinion, my dears?’

‘It sounds exciting,’ said Rosamund.

Alex said politely, ‘I am certain it will delight their Majesties and the Scottish lords and archbishops.’

‘I am glad you deem it so.’ Lady Elizabeth winced and rubbed her forehead with a trembling hand. ‘I have such a megrim coming on. I will have to take my potion soon.’

Rosamund stared at her anxiously.

Lady Elizabeth forced a smile. ‘You must not worry about me, my dear. You know, when I heard your father had died, I could not help thinking it was a pity he did not go sooner in place of my dear Jane and your poor brother.’ Her eyes were suddenly damp and she took a kerchief from the velvet pouch that hung at her waist and dabbed her eyes before flicking white flakes of paint from her gown.

‘I must tell you some good news, Godmother,’ said Rosamund, glancing across at the Baron. ‘My brother, Harry, is not dead as we believed.’

Lady Elizabeth raised her head and fixed her with a hard stare. ‘I don’t understand. What sorcery is this? Your father told me fifteen years ago that he had drowned.’

Alex said, ‘He was deceived. I met Harry twelve years ago in Visby. I will not go into all the details now, but he had escaped captivity aboard a pirate ship and was in need of a friend. After

I missed seeing you at Lathom House, I met Mistress Appleby who was on her way to visit you. It came as quite a shock when we introduced ourselves because, just the same as yourself, she had believed Harry had died fifteen years ago. Now there was I informing her that I knew him and believed that Sir James had recognised him last time he was in London. Whether they met I do not know, because Harry disappeared and Sir James died unexpectedly.'

'I believe Father was murdered,' said Rosamund. 'And I believe my stepmother had Harry abducted.'

Lady Elizabeth drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. 'This is all too much for me to make sense of right now. I do know that woman was ambitious for those sons of hers and gave the elder an exalted idea of himself. I remember thinking that they should be stopped. You know what this means?' she said breathlessly. 'Harry is the rightful heir and can evict that woman from Appleby Manor and get rid of the sons, as well. We have to find him.'

Alex smiled. 'Of course.' He glanced at Rosamund. 'My hope is that he is plying his trade in the ship my grandfather bequeathed him when he died.'

'You did not tell me that your grandfather willed my brother a ship,' said Rosamund, startled.

Lady Elizabeth let out a cackle. 'Good for Harry. The Baron must have thought well of him. Let us hope he will soon return. In the meantime I will mention this whole affair to my kinsman

when we are at Richmond,' she wheezed, nodding her head vigorously and then groaning and holding it with both hands. 'You and I have matters to discuss, Baron. Rosamund, you must be weary after so much travelling. I will have a maid show you to a bedchamber. You must rest and will be summoned when the midday meal is ready.'

Rosamund felt she had been summarily dismissed, having noted that her godmother had called Master Nilsson Baron again. She supposed it was possible that at her age and in her state of health that she was confusing him with his grandfather, the baron. She wondered what the business was that they needed to discuss. The purchase of more amber jewellery, perhaps? She left them alone and went upstairs with the maid.

Lady Elizabeth leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. 'So, Baron, your natural father wants my help,' she murmured.

'Aye.' Alex stared at her with a mixture of sympathy and exasperation, wondering what his father was thinking of when he suggested this interesting, but sick, old lady as a fellow conspirator. 'Have you ever met him? He said you are kin by marriage to the wife of one of his allies.'

'Cicely. She married Lord Mackillin. Like me, they are getting old,' she said mournfully.

'You are not too old to help ensure future peace between Scotland and England,' said Alex politely.

She opened her eyes and leaning forward, patted his knee. 'It was your grandfather who told me that Earl Douglas was your

natural father. He was proud of you and often spoke of your sense of diplomacy and your courage.’ Her voice was barely above a whisper. ‘He is a loss to me, but I presume you will settle down soon and take the reins of the business into your own hands?’

‘Eventually,’ he said after a moment’s hesitation. ‘Right now it is my plan to prevent members of certain clans from destroying the proposed alliance between England and Scotland. I was interested to hear you say that your goddaughter’s stepmother was a McDonald. We must keep our eyes and ears open and ensure that any plot they might conjure up will be thwarted. It is possible they will enlist those Englishmen who wish King Henry’s rule to fail.’

‘Sons whose fathers supported the Yorkist cause and whose lands were taken from them when Richard was defeated at Bosworth,’ whispered Elizabeth. ‘Young lords of noble birth who will have pledged their allegiance to Henry, not only to regain some part of their father’s lands, but to be in a position where they know what is happening at court. I have one such lord amongst my troupe of dancers. I am not saying he will turn traitor, but it may serve you to have him watched.’

‘His name?’ asked Alex, his eyes narrowing.

‘Lord Bude. He is fair-haired and handsome like you, but younger.’

‘You will introduce us?’

‘Of a certainty.’ She smiled. ‘I will introduce you to the troupe this afternoon. My health is not good, as you can see, but I will

manage the steps as long as you follow my lead and do not rush me.'

Alex would have needed to be blind and deaf not to have noticed she had difficulty breathing and could not conceal his concern. 'You do not have to do this, Lady Elizabeth. I deem that your goddaughter could be of use to us.'

Her smile faded. 'I will not have her putting her life at risk. Do not stop me playing my part just because I am old and ill. I would gladly die in the service of my country. Now, I would appreciate your help in getting up from this chair and out of this hall.'

He did as she requested and she clung to his arm as they crossed the hall to the door. 'I suspect I do not have much longer to live,' she gasped, 'that is why I wanted to see Rosamund while I was staying at Lathom House.' Her expression was wistful. 'Unfortunately I caught a chill and could not leave the house. I would that I—I had made the effort sooner, but her father never approved of me.' She paused. 'I need to retire to my bedchamber for a while and take the potion that my physician prescribes. I must rest if I am to initiate you into the dance this afternoon.' They paused in the entrance. 'You will stay here, of course, Baron, until we leave for Richmond.'

'I will happily do so,' said Alex gravely. 'It has occurred to me that Mistress Appleby's stepmother might visit Lathom House and ask whether her stepdaughter left for London in your company. She will receive a negative reply, but she still might decide that her stepdaughter has followed you to London. It is

possible that she will travel south herself to inform her elder son that Rosamund has escaped. It is likely that he might reason that she will have come here.'

Lady Elizabeth gave him an exhausted look. 'You are suggesting that either or both of them might present themselves at my door. The nerve of that woman! What is her son's name? I have forgotten.'

'Edward Fustian. He is a member of the Royal Company of Mercers.'

'I will warn the servants not to allow either of them entry.'

'I would go further and have them deny that either of us have been here,' said Alex, grim-faced. 'I do not want him to know just yet that I am acquainted with either you or Mistress Appleby.'

'You will be our secret weapon,' she chuckled conspiratorially. 'Aye.'

Alex noticed a couple of servants approaching and was relieved to hand over their mistress to her maid. As he went upstairs with the male servant, he thought how he and Rosamund had managed to escape being questioned by her ladyship about how they had travelled to London and in whose company, although the sick woman might yet still do so. He and Rosamund should have discussed their answers further, but it was too late to do so now.

Rosamund wasted no time joining her godmother at the table in her parlour when the summons to the midday meal came. She felt rested and was eager to get to know Lady Elizabeth whilst

the opportunity was available. No mention had been made about Rosamund travelling to Richmond with the other two, so she could only presume that she would stay here at her godmother's mansion in London.

'I hope you do not mind eating in here, my dear,' said Lady Elizabeth, 'but it is much warmer than the hall and easier for the servants.'

'I do not mind at all,' said Rosamund, smiling across the table. 'I hope you are feeling better.' It was hard to tell by looking at her painted face.

Lady Elizabeth's eyes smiled at her goddaughter. 'I feel better for seeing you, my dear. Tell me, what do you think of the Baron? An interesting, attractive man, is he not? He will make some fortunate woman an excellent husband.'

Rosamund's smile faded. *So Master Nilsson was definitely a baron like his grandfather before him.* 'I suppose he would. But why do you mention this to me?' she asked casually.

Lady Elizabeth did not immediately reply, but leaned forward and seized her goddaughter's arm with a clawlike hand. 'How old are you, Rosamund? I'm afraid I have forgotten what year you were born.'

'two-and-twenty,' she answered.

Her godmother sighed. 'I thought as much. Of course, you are old enough to find a husband for yourself, but in the circumstances you could do with a little help.'

'Why do we talk of husbands?' asked Rosamund, her mind in

a whirl. 'Has he spoken to you about my needing to get married?' 'Certainly not!' Her godmother looked at her keenly. 'Why didn't your father choose a husband for you years ago, when you were in the first bloom of womanhood?'

'I deem he believed my stepmother when she told him I was mad,' said Rosamund sadly. 'She wanted me to marry Edward, but thankfully, Father would not allow it. As for William, he said that no man would want to marry me. Not only was I ugly, but I was too much of a bad bargain for any man to take on.'

'What wicked things to say to you, my dear, and not true,' said Lady Elizabeth indignantly. 'Well, you've escaped them now and you will marry.'

'No. You must not concern yourself,' said Rosamund hastily. 'Besides, I have no dowry.'

'No dowry! Does the Baron know this?'

Rosamund stiffened. 'I do not remembering raising the matter with him. Why should I?'

'Because he is your best prospect. He does not need the money, but with a dowry you will not feel like a beggar maid when you accept him. I will send for my lawyer instantly and he will deal with this matter of a dowry before we leave for Richmond.'

Rosamund was stunned. 'No! You must not do this. I do not wish to marry and, even if I did, I have decided that I will wait until Harry's return before doing so,' she added rashly.

Lady Elizabeth gave her a shrewd look. 'Has the Baron

compromised you, my dear?’

Rosamund gasped. ‘Certainly not! How can you suggest such a thing? The Baron is an honourable man.’

Her godmother’s eyes wore a satisfied expression. ‘So he has proposed marriage to you?’

‘I did not say that!’

‘No, you did not, but I can imagine that he is determined that you will not suffer by your both succumbing to temptation. I do not blame you for being charmed by him. He is just like his grandfather, irresistible.’

‘No! It was not like that at all,’ cried Rosamund, jumping to her feet. ‘I am chaste.’

A spasm twisted Lady Elizabeth’s face and she removed her hairpiece and scratched her almost-bald pate. Rosamund could only stare at her. ‘Close your mouth, dear. You look like a fish,’ said her godmother, replacing her wig. ‘So he asked you to marry him and you tell me you are chaste.’ Her tone was thoughtful.

Rosamund was angry and embarrassed and attempted to change the direction of the conversation. ‘It was extremely rude of me to stare at you in such an illbred manner.’ Her voice was terse.

‘No more than I was in removing my wig in your company, but it itches so at times and that makes my head ache even worse.’ Lady Elizabeth paused. ‘Don’t be angry with me, my dear. I am only interested in your well-being. I did, after all, notice that neither of you arrived with servants, nor did you mention having

company on the road. In the circumstances, you would be a fool to refuse him.'

Rosamund clenched her fists. 'He has not asked me to marry him and there is no need for him to marry me. I am chaste and I do not wish to marry him.'

'Why not? He is rich, handsome and charming.'

'Because...' Rosamund's voice trailed off. She could not tell her godmother that the Baron was in love with another woman. Most likely she would not believe her.

'I understand,' said Lady Elizabeth, shaking her head. 'Young women are always full of romantic notions. You wish to be wooed.'

Rosamund had not thought of that as a reason for refusing the Baron's proposal, but now she decided that it was as good a one as any other, so she acknowledged there was some truth in Lady Elizabeth's words.

Her godmother nodded. 'You must come with us to Richmond Palace for the celebrations. There should be time enough there for the Baron to woo you in the proper style.'

Chapter Eight

A thrill raced through Rosamund at the thought of being wooed by the Baron. 'You mean I can accompany you to the royal palace without prior permission?'

Lady Elizabeth gave a laugh that sounded like rustling dry leaves. 'I am related to the royal family and they are accustomed to my starts and fancies. In truth, they consider me a little mad at times and I would not deny that on occasions a certain mood takes me and—' Her expression changed. 'Here comes the Baron! He really is a fine figure of a man. I have not told you, but my troupe of players are all noble men and women. It is as the queen requested.' She hailed Alex. 'Come, sit with my goddaughter. I have decided that Rosamund will accompany us to Richmond.'

Rosamund watched his face to see if he was pleased or not, but he wore that bland expression that made his thoughts unreadable. What would he think if he knew about their earlier conversation?

'I already had it in mind that Mistress Appleby should accompany us,' said Alex, seating himself at the head of the table between the two women. 'She will be much safer at Richmond.'

'Good. I am glad we agree,' said Lady Elizabeth placidly. 'Here comes our meal.'

Rosamund knew that she should be relieved that her godmother and the Baron were in agreement. Yet now she felt oddly put out by the fact she appeared to have no say in what

should happen to her with these two people for whom she had strong feelings. She watched as the servants began to serve boiled hare in a sauce that proved to be made from ale, pepper, bread and onions.

Lady Elizabeth began to separate the meat from the bones. ‘My dears, I am thinking that God granted me ten extra years of life so that I could be of help to you both.’ She broke off for several moments and Rosamund held her breath, thinking that her godmother might be about to reveal all to the Baron. Instead she continued with a change of subject. ‘I hope you are both hungry. I asked for *toste riale* to be made for pudding. No doubt you have tasted it, Baron. I first did so in Calais.’ She signalled to the servant to pour the wine and drank off a draught all in one go.

‘What is *toste riale*?’ asked Rosamund, thinking she could not help but be fascinated by all that her godmother did. How could she down her wine so swiftly when there were times when she seemed hardly able to breathe?

‘It is a paste of sugar, spices and sweet wine,’ said Alex, smiling at Rosamund as the lady paused to wipe her chin with her napkin.

‘There is more to it than that,’ said Lady Elizabeth, ‘there is quince, raisins, nuts and flour spread hot over white bread and sprinkled with sugar.’ She smacked her lips.

‘It sounds delicious,’ said Rosamund, quite affected by the Baron’s smile.

Lady Elizabeth nodded. ‘I want you to have some pleasure in

life, Rosamund dear, because I fear you have been dreadfully unhappy. That is why you must marry a rich man.'

Alex almost choked on a morsel of meat and had to wait for the coughing to subside before saying, 'You have been discussing marriage with Mistress Appleby?'

'Aye. I have decided what she needs is a childless widower,' said the lady.

Rosamund stared at her in astonishment.

'I do not agree,' said Alex, putting down his knife. 'I wonder at your making such a pronouncement, Lady Elizabeth.'

'I shall tell you why,' wheezed the lady. 'I was younger than Rosamund when my parents chose a much older man for me. My head was full of nonsense. I was convinced I would be happier with a young, brave knight in shining armour. I wept on my wedding night. But when George died I inherited all his money and was still young enough to enjoy being rich.' She beamed at them both.

'It is vital that a man should be able to support his future wife, but there should be affection and respect and trust in a marriage,' said Alex, glancing at Rosamund before giving Lady Elizabeth his attention once more. 'You were obviously not happy living with your husband if you set about enjoying yourself once he was dead.'

'I agree with the Baron,' said Rosamund bravely.

'You feel like that because you are young, my dears,' mumbled Lady Elizabeth through a mouthful of food. 'Your blood gets

heated and it is lust that drives you, not wisdom.'

Rosamund felt her cheeks burning and quickly lowered her gaze to her platter. What would her godmother say next? She hoped the Baron did not think that she had poured out all that had happened between them to Lady Elizabeth.

'You embarrass Mistress Appleby,' hissed Alex.

'If my goddaughter is to marry, Baron, then she needs to know what to expect when bedded by a young man driven by his animal passions. That is, if she does not know already.'

There was a whimpering sound from Rosamund.

'You will stop this,' said Alex in a furious whisper. 'Are you mad?'

'I do not mean to offend, Baron, but I suggest you remember your manners, too,' said the old lady, giving her attention to her dinner. 'You are a guest in my house and should not speak to me in such a way. I understand you are under a great strain and I will forgive you and say no more. Now, let us eat up this good food.'

Alex wondered what she meant by his being under a great strain, but at least she was as good as her word and did not speak again. But she had created an atmosphere that made him reluctant to break the silence. What had Rosamund been saying to her? Had she lied about what had taken place on their journey to London? He felt so angry that he was tempted to storm out of the parlour and go to stay with Walther and Maud. He glared at Rosamund, who flushed to the roots of her hair, but there was an expression in her lovely eyes that kept him glued to his seat.

Rosamund was all of aquiver, remembering how she had felt when she and the Baron were caught in that forced embrace in the snow. Were her feelings then love or lust? What was he thinking? It was obvious he was angry and she did not blame him. No doubt he would never ask her to marry him and she realised that she might just enjoy finding out about love in his arms. This despite his having deceived her about his station in life.

By the time the meat course was cleared away and the dessert placed in front of them, Alex and Rosamund had calmed down a little and were able to enjoy the delicious confection set before them. More wine was poured and comments made about the food and weather. Rosamund asked when the troupe would be arriving.

‘They will soon be here, as will the musicians,’ said Lady Elizabeth. ‘You must come and watch the Baron being taught his steps. I swear he will be in trouble if he treads on my toes.’

The words had scarcely left Lady Elizabeth’s lips when a servant came hurrying into the hall and whispered in her ear. No sooner had the meal been cleared away than a young woman entered the hall, carrying a black-and-silver gown over her arm. Her eyes alighted on Lady Elizabeth and she hurried over to her. She was followed by several other young men and women. The women reminded Rosamund of butterflies because their skirts fluttered and they were dressed in a variety of colours.

‘Lady Elizabeth, I bring bad tidings,’ trilled the first woman. ‘Lady Joan cannot join us. She has caught a fever and is abed.’

She begs your pardon for disappointing you.'

Elizabeth uttered a *tsk* of annoyance before saying, 'Poor Lady Joan, I hope she will soon be well. It does make matters awkward. The figures will not be right for the dance and we have so little time to find someone else to take her place. The Baron here will partner me.'

The group stared at Alex and one of the ladies smiled. 'Introduce us, Lady Elizabeth.'

'This is Baron Dalsland from Sweden. His grandfather was a great friend of mine and brought me many precious jewels from his country,' said Lady Elizabeth.

'Has he danced before?' said another lady with bold eyes.

'But of course,' said Alex, smiling down at her. 'I would be of little use as a replacement if I could not.'

'I will take you in hand,' said the bold-eyed lady.

Rosamund, sitting on a chair in front of the fire, watched this light flirtation with startled eyes and more than a little annoyance.

'That will be unnecessary,' said Lady Elizabeth firmly. 'I will allow no dalliance during the dance. I have said that I will partner the Baron.'

'What about this young lady?' asked one of the men, noticing Rosamund.

'Oh, I cannot dance,' she said hastily.

He laughed. 'I do not believe that is true. Everyone can dance.'

'Not me,' said Rosamund firmly.

All attention was now on Rosamund. 'I could teach you,'

said the fair-haired man who had spoken. 'The steps are not so difficult and you could fill Lady Joan's place. We do not have to perform for another three days, so you could perfect the steps in no time. May I introduce myself? I am Lord Bude.'

Rosamund could not resist looking at Alex to see what he thought of the young man's suggestion. He was frowning. Obviously, he believed she was not good enough to dance with an English lord before royalty.

'I deem it a wonderful notion,' said Lady Elizabeth, much to Rosamund's surprise. 'May I introduce my goddaughter, Mistress Rosamund Appleby, lords and ladies. Her parents are dead and she has recently come to live with me.'

The party eyed Rosamund with as much interest as they had the Baron. The lady who had broken the news about Lady Joan, said, 'It is fate! You are of the same height and have the same colouring as Lady Joan, Mistress Appleby, and, as Lord Bude has said, the steps are not difficult.'

Alex wanted to disagree. Bude was the name Lady Elizabeth had mentioned earlier as a man who might possibly turn traitor. He was obviously of a flirtatious manner; if he was as poor as her ladyship had said, then he would be on the lookout for a wealthy heiress. Perhaps he thought Rosamund might inherit her godmother's fortune. How was Alex to know that her head would not be turned by this handsome young lord? He could not allow that to happen.

But before Alex could make a move on the young lord, one

of the ladies approached him.

‘I know something of your homeland, Baron,’ she said. ‘I admired Lady Elizabeth’s amber jewellery and she told me it was made in Sweden. I asked my father if he would buy me such a set, but he refused. He said I needed a rich husband if I wanted such trinkets.’

‘Hardly a trinket, Margaret, if your father cannot afford such jewellery,’ said one of the other ladies. ‘It must be worth a fortune.’

‘Enough!’ said Lady Elizabeth, clapping her hands. ‘We are here to dance. My goddaughter will attempt to fill Lady Joan’s position.’

Rosamund opened her mouth to say that she had not agreed, but it was too late. Already Lord Bude was reaching for her hand and her godmother was nodding in her direction. ‘You had best try on Lady Joan’s costume this evening in case it needs altering, Rosamund, my dear. We will walk through the dance several times to give you and the Baron a chance to familiarise yourselves with the steps without the music.’

Rosamund took a deep breath as Lord Bude’s soft, white hand clasped hers. ‘Now pay attention, Mistress Rosamund,’ he said in her ear. ‘No one expects you to be as good as the rest of us, but no doubt your pretty face will make up for any faults.’

Immediately Rosamund wanted to tug her hand out of his grasp and resume her seat by the fire, but the other dancers were already calling out instructions. She did her best to comply with

what they said, but there were too many voices telling her what to do and she stepped on Bude's toes more than once.

She glanced up at him, apologizing, and instantly was aware that his eyes were gazing down her cleavage. She lost all desire to do well and made a complete mess of the steps when the music began and she was supposed to dance in earnest. It was a relief when the wheezing Lady Elizabeth eventually signalled a halt.

Concerned about her, Alex led her over to the settle and made her sit down. She whispered to him to tell the others that there would be another rehearsal tomorrow evening at Richmond. He did so.

The musicians and dancers departed, chorusing their farewells. Only Lord Bude lingered. 'Perhaps I could give you a private lesson this evening,' he suggested, taking one of Rosamund's hands and kissing it.

'I think not, Lord Bude,' said Alex, removing Rosamund's hand from the other man's grasp. 'Mistress Appleby has had a long journey and needs her rest.'

Bude scowled. 'Surely Mistress Appleby can make her own decisions? I really don't see what it has to do with you, Baron?'

'But that is because you are unaware that the lady and I are betrothed,' said Alex politely.

Only by a blinking of the eyes did Rosamund betray that she was more surprised than Bude to hear those words. His lordship muttered an apology and with a terse good night left the hall.

'Why did you tell him that we were betrothed?' demanded

Rosamund, as soon as Bude was out of earshot.

Alex was asking himself the same question. It would have been wiser if he had allowed Rosamund to encourage Bude to discover if he had any dealings with those with treacherous intent. 'He is a fortune-hunter,' snapped Alex. 'Do not take what I said to heart. I still have no intention of getting married until I am thirty.'

A sharp laugh escaped Rosamund. 'Then you should have remained silent. You are forgetting that not only do you wish to be avenged on my brother, but also that I have no fortune.'

'He knows that Lady Elizabeth is extremely wealthy and that you, her goddaughter, have recently come to live with her. It is obvious Bude smells money when he looks at you.'

Two spots of colour appeared high on Rosamund's cheeks and she tugged her hand free. 'You are insulting. Did you not consider he might find me comely?'

'Bude cannot afford to be swayed solely by a lovely face,' he said harshly.

'Why should I believe you? He is a lord of the realm, whilst you are a foreigner, unable to trust me with your real identity.'

Alex realised that he had hurt her and his voice was gentler when he said, 'I did not trust those lords and ladies with it either.'

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